Beyond the Stage Lights [Project Sekai]

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Beyond the Stage Lights [Project Sekai]

by ExitCue

Summary

I wasn’t supposed to be here.

A flicker of static across the sky, a Sekai without color or sound, and a voice that whispered, “Can you hear me?”

It called to me but... I’m not part of the story. Not yet.

Notes

See the end of the work for notes

Chapter 1: Tap to Start

Chapter Summary

> Yuu Hazuki is just a rhythm game nerd, Osu, Arcaea, Deemo, Cytus, Phigros... and of course, Project Sekai.
>
> They're not a singer. Not a performer. Just a fan watching from the other side of the screen.
>
> But one strange glitch, and the voice of a broken Miku, pulls them into a place that shouldn't exist.
>
> The stage was never meant for them.
>
> So why is it calling?

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

> The school bell rang, sharp and clear, cutting through the lingering chatter of the classroom.
>
> “Oh? Finally,” Yuu Hazuki muttered, slinging his backpack over one shoulder in a single, practiced motion. “Time to head home.”
>
> He reached for his phone instinctively, already itching to the world where notes fell and his heart raced with every beat just before he could slip it into his hoodie pocket, a voice called from the next row.
>
> “Hazuki, heading out already?”
>
> “Yeah,” Yuu replied with a lazy nod. “Got something important to do.”
>
> “Oh? Important?” The classmate leaned forward, smirking knowingly. “Right… new units drop today, huh? Why not pull now?”
>
> Yuu grinned. “Because you’re bad luck.”
>
> “Uwah! That hurts, man!”
>
> They stepped into the hallway, falling in with the stream of students heading out, conversations swirling around them.
>
> “Kawaki-kun, you know what actually hurts?” Yuu asked as they descended the stairs.
>
> “What?”
>
> “Getting a single miss… at the end of a perfect combo run.”

Kawaki snorted. “Look, I don’t care about that. I only care about the units.”

“Wow~ Rude,” Yuu huffed, dramatically offended. “You’re gonna get raided by half the fandom for disrespecting their favorite songs.”

“I’ll survive.”

Yuu let out a soft laugh, his fingers still absently tapping at his phone with the fluid precision of someone who lived off perfect combos and 1-miss heartbreaks.

“By the way,” Kawaki said casually, “Is it okay if you grind my account?”

“No,” Yuu replied flatly.

“Why not? I mean, you’re good at rhythm games, right?”

“And what if I am?”

“Come on, Hazuki! Please?”

Yuu sighed, running a hand through his hair. “You’re annoying… but fine. I’m itching to clear your shitty stages anyway.”

“Uwahh! Thank you!” Kawaki beamed. “I’ll send my account through Discord!”

Yuu rolled his eyes. “You better not have weird settings again. I swear, the last time your offset was cursed.”

With that, the two went their separate ways, their footsteps drifting apart among the crowd of students. Before long, Yuu was alone at the bus stop, the late afternoon sun casting long shadows across the pavement.

He slumped onto the bench and unlocked his phone with a flick of his thumb.

“Let’s see what units they’ve got for us today…”

He turned the screen horizontally as the familiar loading screen lit up, accompanied by music he knew by heart. A quick update rolled through, then the event banner appeared.

“Oho? Night’s Treasure Gacha… and it’s a Unit-Limited Event.” A grin spread across his face. “Good thing I saved up for today’s banner. I’ve even got enough for a spark.”

“Come on… come home, Mafuyu~ Please come home…” Yuu whispered, eyes locked on the shimmering gacha animation.

The screen lit up with color — a golden burst, then a swirl of blue.

Four-star. His heart leapt.

“Please… please—”

The character silhouette began to form, pixels flickering and dancing into shape—

Then froze.

“Huh?”

The music cut off.

His screen went dark for a second… then flickered back on.

But something was wrong.

The background was blank.

No sparkles, no lights.

Just an empty, pale void.

No pull result.

No character.

Nothing.

“What the hell…?”

Yuu tapped the screen.

Nothing responded.

Then, faintly—barely audible through his earphones, he heard something.

“Can you hear me…?”

It wasn’t the gacha voice line. It wasn’t any character he recognized.

It sounded distant… broken… almost like someone whispering through static.

He stared, frozen, as the screen glitched again, this time showing a flash of teal hair, then static, then...

Black.

His phone restarted itself.

Yuu blinked.

“…That’s… new.”

The bus hadn’t arrived yet.

But something else had.

“Hey… wait a minute!” Yuu sat up straight, clutching his phone like it had just personally betrayed him. “What about my pulls?! I wasted ten pulls for that!”

He jabbed at the screen as it came back to life, the familiar Project Sekai icon glowing on his home page.

No way was he letting that glitch steal a potential Mafuyu.

He launched the app. The screen dimmed, then brightened—everything seemed normal again. Loading bar. Music. Start screen.

“Alright, come on. Give me my history back—”

But as soon as he tapped Start, the screen didn’t load into the main menu.

Instead, it faded to white.

No units.

No songs.

No UI.

Just a single, empty stage bathed in static light.

and in the distance…

A faint, humming melody.

Off-key. Broken.

Calling him.

“I found you.”

The voice cut through the silence—gentle, feminine, but layered with static, like a cassette tape left out in the rain.

Yuu blinked.

“…Huh?”

Before he could react, the screen burst into white.

A blinding light erupted from his phone, far too bright for any LCD should be. He winced, shielding his eyes—but it was no use. The world around him dissolved in that instant.

The sound of traffic, wind, people—gone.

For one brief moment, everything was silent.

And then.

He was no longer sitting at the bus stop.

Chapter End Notes

Thank you for reading the prologue! Things are only going to get stranger from here! If you liked it, consider dropping a kudos or comment!

(Also, don't kill me if I did something wrong, or made an error.

Please don't kill me, but instead just correct me.)

Chapter 2: The Sekai That Shouldn’t Exist

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

Yuu Hazuki stirred.

His eyes fluttered open, only to be met by a blinding overhead light that made him squint. It wasn't the harsh fluorescent glow of the bus stop or the warm sunlight from earlier. No, this was... sterile. Artificial.

He blinked slowly, trying to focus.

The first thing he noticed was the floor beneath him—smooth, pale, and glossy like a freshly cleaned stage. Not a speck of dust. It reflected light unnaturally, as though reality had forgotten how physics worked here.

“…Where…”

He sat up, his fingers pressing into the cold surface beneath him. It didn’t feel like any material he recognized—neither tile, nor wood, nor plastic. Just... smooth. Blank. Empty.

Yuu turned his head.

There were no buildings. No bus stop. No people. Just an endless white stage that stretched far in all directions. Curtains of light swayed around the perimeter like distant auroras, yet there was no wind.

"...The hell?"

His heart began to race.

Not in the panicked, full-blown horror way, yet.

More like the way it felt when he dropped a combo at 99% or suddenly hit a difficulty spike mid-song.

He stood up, brushing off imaginary dust from his pants out of habit, and pulled out his phone.

Still in his hand.

Of course.

Yuu clicked the power button.

Nothing.

He held it down.

Still nothing.

“Come on… don’t crap out on me now…”

He flipped it around. No cracks. No overheating. It was perfectly fine, except for the fact that it had basically turned into a rectangular paperweight.

He sighed and slipped it back into his pocket. “Figures. Classic isekai moment. Am I in a dream or something?”

Yuu turned in place. Somewhere in the distance—just barely audible—he could hear something. A note. No… a hum. Low, droning, almost mournful.

A voice?

“La… la… la… la…”

Off-key.

Uneven.

Glitchy.

Yuu’s eyes narrowed.

He followed the sound.

With each step, the stage beneath him rippled like water, but held firm. It was like walking across a frozen lake that didn’t creak.

Eventually, the curtains of light parted ahead, and he saw her.

A figure.

Standing in the middle of the stage.

Perfect posture.

Long teal twintails, motionless in the windless air.

Head bowed slightly forward, arms dangling loosely by her sides like a marionette on standby.

“...Miku?”

Yuu’s voice echoed, but the figure didn’t move.

The humming stopped.

He took a cautious step forward. Then another.

“Why are you here?”

Her voice pierced through the silence. It wasn’t like the cheerful, upbeat voice lines he was used to. This one sounded hollow.

Filtered.

As if she were speaking through an old radio with broken reception.

Yuu froze.

His throat tightened.

"…I—I don't know."

Miku slowly lifted her head.

Her eyes glowed, not bright, not alive, but flickering.

Like old stage lights left on too long.

"You're not supposed to exist here."

"Hold on," Yuu said, throwing up his hands. "Even I don't understand what's going on…!"

His voice cracked slightly, echoing across the strange, silent space.

"I was pulling for the unit's banner and bam—I suddenly got here!"

The girl, Miku, or at least something wearing her face, tilted her head slightly.

Her expression didn't change.

No smile.

No reaction.

Just flickering teal eyes watching him like a scanner reading a corrupted file.

"You pulled… the banner?" she repeated slowly, like the words were foreign.

"Yeah. I even saved enough for a spark. I was aiming for Mafuyu—"

Yuu stopped himself mid-sentence, realizing how ridiculous that sounded in the moment. "I mean. That's not the point."

Miku took one step forward.

Yuu instinctively took one step back.

"Calm down," he said, hands still up. "I'm not here to do anything weird, okay? I just… I don't know how I got here. One second I'm outside—bus stop, sunset, chill music—and the next, I'm in white void Sekai with creepy lighting and you glitching like a horror mod."

He paused. "No offense."

She blinked.

"This place does not recognize you."

"…Yeah. Well, I don't recognize this place either. So we're even."

“Yet you were found.”

Her voice was soft. Too soft. Almost like a whisper in his skull.

Yuu swallowed.

“…Found by who?”

“Hold on,” Yuu said, throwing up his hands. “Even I don’t understand what’s going on…!”

His voice cracked slightly, echoing across the strange, silent space.

“I was pulling for the unit’s banner and—bam—I suddenly got here!”

The girl—Miku, or at least something wearing her face—tilted her head slowly. Her expression didn’t change. No smile. No spark of recognition. Just flickering teal eyes, watching him like a scanner trying to decode a corrupted file.

Miku took one slow step forward.

Yuu instinctively mirrored her with a step back.

“Calm down,” he said, his palms still raised. “I’m not here to do anything weird, okay? I just… I don’t know how I got here. One second I’m outside—bus stop, sunset, chill music—and the next, I’m in this white void Sekai with horror mod lighting and you glitching like something out of a rhythm creepypasta.”

He paused. “…No offense.”

She blinked once, long and deliberate.

“This place does not recognize you.”

“…Yeah. Well, I don’t recognize this place either. So we’re even.”

There was a stillness. Miku’s gaze never wavered.

“Yet… you were found.”

Her voice was soft. Too soft. It didn’t echo—it just slipped directly into his head, like an uninvited thought. Yuu felt the hairs on his neck stand.

He swallowed.

“…Found by who?”

No answer. Just silence.

And then.

“Say,” she whispered, “can you play a song for me?”

Yuu blinked. “A song…?”

Before he could ask what she meant, something materialized in front of him.

A soft chime rang out, and a shimmering, holographic interface appeared, floating midair, glowing faint blue and violet. It looked like… a custom song stage select, stylized like Project Sekai's menus, but warped. Distorted.

Five song panels hovered in front of him. None of them had titles.

No BPM. No difficulty.

Just static.

"What… is this?" he muttered, stepping closer.

His hand reached out instinctively, like muscle memory guiding him through muscle panic.

The moment his fingertip hovered over one of the panels.

"You want me to play a song...?" Yuu asked, voice low, eyes darting between the holographic interface and the flickering Miku in front of him. "...I'll try."

He lifted a finger and tapped.

The stage pulsed beneath his feet the moment his fingertip touched the panel. A flash of static erupted across the world, followed by a sharp chime—one that sounded almost like the Project Sekai loading sound.

Almost.

But wrong.

The panel vanished. In its place, dark streaks spread across the once-pristine white stage like ink on paper. The shimmering sky above dimmed, and a faint instrumental began playing—familiar, yet unrecognizable. A melody twisted just slightly off-key, like a beloved cover corrupted by lag.

The notes began falling.

Not on a screen.

In front of him.

Glowing arrows, circles, and sliders descended in midair, forming a massive, projected note highway that stretched out over the void. Each one shimmered like it was made of glass, flickering in and out of existence as they fell toward the glowing center below.

Yuu's breath hitched. His hands trembled—not from fear, but instinct.

"I… I know this."

His feet moved first.

Then his hands.

And before he knew it, he was playing.

Not tapping—not on a screen—but performing.

His fingers traced each floating note like he'd done it a thousand times before. Slides danced through the air, trails of light following his hands like a stage illusion. When he hit the timing perfectly, the world responded—each perfect flaring gold beneath his feet.

Despite the surreal setting, his body remembered.

Osu, Arcaea, Cytus, Deemo, and Project Sekai.

His rhythm gamer instincts had transcended glass.

For a moment, he smiled.

Until the background glitched again.

Miku.

She moved now.

Her head twitched slightly to the beat.

Not dancing.

Not performing.

Just staring.

And humming along.

But the more perfect Yuu played, the more the world began to destabilize.

The song's tempo started to rise. The color palette dimmed. Notes became erratic—almost alive, shifting their paths slightly to throw him off. His foot slipped on one that unexpectedly changed direction midair.

"Hey!"

He staggered, catching his balance just in time to hit a fast slider, but the system didn't register it.

"Miss."

His heart sank.

The stage groaned.

No—cracked.

A massive fracture opened across the floor, like glass under stress.

Miku tilted her head again.

"Why are you playing a song… that doesn't belong to you?"

Yuu's hands froze midair.

The notes kept falling.

Cracks spiderwebbed beneath his feet, each miss deepening the fractures in the stage like glass under pressure. Every imperfection—every misstep—was an attack on the stability of this strange world. The rhythm had turned hostile, no longer welcoming, no longer fair.

It wasn't human.

It didn't want him to succeed.

It wanted him to fail.

And finally, he did.

FAILED.

No screen. No gentle retry button. Just one overwhelming boom that slammed into his chest like a punch made of disappointment and despair. The stage groaned beneath him—then shattered.

Yuu barely raised his arms before the world caved in.

Light collapsed.

Gravity twisted.

And then.

Silence.

A soft click.

Yuu opened his eyes.

He was standing again.

Right where he had started, back in the infinite white void. The holographic interface hovered in front of him, as if nothing had happened. The five panels remained untouched. Silent. Waiting.

Miku stood where she had been all along, arms slack, head slightly tilted. Watching.

Yuu's breath hitched.

His shoulders rose and fell. He clutched his own arms like the phantom memory of rhythm still ached in his bones.

The beat still echoed faintly in his ears—haunted, warped, distorted. A melody he never chose, yet somehow knew.

"…I don't know…" he whispered.

His voice barely broke the stillness.

“I don’t know why I’m here. I don’t know what this place is. I don’t even know what that song was…”

Miku said nothing.

Yuu looked down at his trembling hands, flexing his fingers slowly.

“I just…”

He paused. Sighed. Looked up again.

“I just… don’t want to leave this world feeling like a failure.”

A long, heavy silence passed.

Then, Miku’s lips moved.

“You are an error.”

Yuu blinked.

But she wasn’t finished.

“Yet… you played.”

Her voice had changed. No longer cold. No longer robotic. The digital echo had softened, tinged now with something… human. Or perhaps just curious.

He met her eyes again.

And for a flicker of a moment, they were no longer empty.

Yuu took a breath.

Then stepped forward.

“…Miku.”

He clenched his fists and stared at the panel, the same one he failed, now flickering gently, as if listening.

“I don’t know what’s going on,” he said. “I don’t know who brought me here. But…”

He took another step. Then tapped the panel again.

“I’m going to play that song.”

The interface lit up once more.

The ghostly beat returned, slightly less broken this time, like the melody was healing with his resolve.

His body moved.

Not guided by panic, but rhythm.

A purpose with pride

tap

tap-tap-slide

hold—release

His feet glided across the strange, glassy floor, each movement syncing perfectly to the beat.

Every note matched a step. Every slide followed his motion like a flowing wind.

His limbs didn't shake anymore; they danced.

The stage no longer cracked.

It lit up beneath him.

And behind him, he heard something new.

A second voice.

Humming along.

He turned his head slightly, without missing a beat.

Miku had raised one hand. Her mouth moved, syncing perfectly with the strange melody. Her voice —fragmented, glitched—was gaining color.

Like she was remembering what it meant to sing.

Yuu didn't stop.

Couldn't stop.

The music filled his chest, not a soundtrack, not a BGM, but a presence.

The once-chaotic melody now pulsed with warmth, steadier than before. The notes still floated through the air, but they were no longer malicious. No longer slipping away just before he could reach them.

They welcomed him.

And beside him, Miku moved.

First step.

Then another.

And then she began to sing.

The moment her voice joined the song, the Sekai around them shimmered—white void fading into soft, prismatic hues, like the sunrise bleeding through clouds. The cracks that once spread across the floor closed, replaced by luminous trails of color with every movement Yuu made.

He danced, no, performed—like it was second nature.

His body found rhythms where there were none. His hands slid into motions he had only ever performed on screens, now amplified into graceful arcs of motion and control. His breath timed perfectly with the BPM. Every step echoed like a heartbeat.

Miku spun around him.

Her voice trembled at first, like she had forgotten how to sing—but it grew, second by second, line by line. What was once broken and empty slowly rebuilt itself. She sang without lyrics, only melody, yet it filled the Sekai like poetry never needed words.

Yuu matched her movement, gliding along the beat, eyes locked on hers.

He was no longer a stranger fumbling through a foreign song. He was a player. A performer. And this stage—this moment—belonged to him just as much as it did to her.

Perfect.
Perfect.
Perfect.

Every note hit.

Every motion is synced.

The Sekai responded. The light grew brighter. The stage extended outward, stretching into a sky of sound. Instruments joined them—piano, strings, faint percussion—each rising in tandem with Yuu's pulse.

And then.

As the chorus approached.

She harmonized with him.

Not just vocally, but in soul.

Miku's expression softened. The mechanical tension melted from her frame. Her voice, now radiant and full, soared above the melody, wrapping around Yuu's every step. She smiled—faint, hesitant—but real.

They moved together.

Two silhouettes against a shifting aurora.

Two performers, syncing for the first time.

The final notes descended.

Yuu’s arms lifted, his body turned, he struck the last beat with one final, perfect movement.

And then.

Silence.

Not the cold, crushing silence from before.

But soft.

Warm.

Fulfilling.

The stage pulsed once.

Then everything froze.

A glowing window of text appeared above them:

FULL COMBO
SCORE: 100%
— “Synthetic Aurora [Lost Arrangement]” Cleared —

Yuu staggered slightly, out of breath. His chest heaved as he placed a hand over his heart. Sweat clung to his brow, but his lips carried the faintest smile.

“I… I did it.”

Miku turned to him.

“You cleared it,” she said quietly.

He nodded. “I didn’t just clear it. I felt it.”

She stared at him for a moment.

Then lowered her head—not in sadness, but in something akin to reverence.

“…Thank you.”

Yuu’s eyes widened. “Huh?”

“This Sekai was empty,” she continued. “Silent. I could not remember the song. I could not remember why I sang.”

She stepped closer, gaze softening.

“But when you played it… I remembered the warmth. The rhythm. The emotion. I remembered what it meant to perform for someone.”

He blinked.

“I… I didn’t do anything that special. I just played a song.”

“You played with heart.”

She offered him her hand.

“Would you… perform again?”

Yuu looked down at her outstretched hand.

Then up at the now-glowing sky.

“…I think I’d like that.”

He took her hand.

The world lit up.

Yuu gasped as his eyes snapped open.

“Gah!”

He shot upright in bed, his heart pounding.

The morning light filtered in through the window, and the familiar hum of the city outside greeted him.

The dream—no, the experience was gone, leaving him with only a sense of lingering confusion.

The white void.

The song.

Miku’s voice.

All of it felt so vivid, so real.

“…So it was a dream…” Yuu muttered, running a hand through his messy hair as he rubbed his eyes.

The remnants of the strange, surreal performance still echoed in his mind like the fading hum of a distant melody.

He swung his legs off the bed, still dazed, and reached for his phone on the nightstand.

His fingers brushed against the screen, and the lock screen appeared.

“Haah… If it’s all a dream, does that mean everything I pulled in the gacha banner was also a dream?”

He opened his phone.

His thumb froze.

“Eh?! Where’s my Project Sekai?!”

The app was gone.

His mind raced. Had it really been a dream?

He frantically swiped through his phone, checking his other apps, no sign of the game, no history of his pulls, no updates. Just an empty slot where it used to be.

He scrambled to open the gacha folder.

Nothing.

His heart thudded in his chest.

The empty feeling from before started to creep back in.

Just then, the door to his room swung open with a loud bang.

“Oh, would you shut up! Get ready to eat your breakfast, or else you’ll be late!”

Yuu blinked, startled. “Late? It’s 6:50 AM though!?”

The voice from outside the door sounded exasperated. “What is this guy talking about? Isn’t today your first day in Kamiyama High?”

Yuu’s eyes widened.

“…Huh?!”

He shot up from his bed, his mind trying to piece together what was happening.

First day of Kamiyama High?

Isn't that... the in-game and story location?!

Chapter End Notes

Thank you for reading this chapter of Beyond the Stage Lights!

This chapter serves as both an introduction and a surreal dive into a world where the boundary between game and reality begins to crack. If you’re a fan of Project Sekai or rhythm games in general, I hope you enjoy this twist on immersion!

Chapter 3: This isn't a dream, is it?

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

Yuu Hazuki stood frozen in the middle of his room, phone still in hand, hair sticking up wildly in every direction like a protagonist who just rolled out of bed into an alternate reality.

"…Kamiyama High?" he muttered.

He looked around, eyes scanning every corner of the room like it might cough up an explanation. The posters on the wall? The same. His shelf stacked with rhythm game CDs? Still perfectly aligned. His desk—cluttered with headphone wires and snack wrappers—untouched.

Then his eyes landed on the calendar.

He rushed over.

April 7th.
First day of school.

But not the school he remembered.

"I don't go to Kamiyama High," he said under his breath. "I go to—"

He stopped.

Blank.

His mouth hung slightly open as his brain reached for a name that wasn't there. Not a single syllable surfaced. His own high school? His college? The city he lived in?

Gone.

"…I'm a college student…" he whispered.

But the more he said it, the more it sounded like a fading dream. The only thing his mind clung to now was one phrase.

Kamiyama High.

Like it had always been that way.

Ding!

His phone vibrated. A notification popped up—not from Discord, or LINE, or Messenger.

An unfamiliar app.

The icon was shaped like a music note fused with a speech bubble.

[Message from: Aoyagi Toya]
Toya: “Yuu-kun. hurry up or the gates’ll close on your first day…”

Yuu stared at the name.

“…Aoyagi Toya? That Aoyagi?”

It couldn’t be. He knew that name. Rhythm game fans everywhere knew that name.

He tapped the chat.

A full message history unfurled.

Friendly texts.
Memes.
Screenshots of scores.
Inside jokes.
Photo spam.

As if they’d known each other for years.

“No. Nope. This is weird. This is very weird.”

He backed out of the chat and opened his contacts list.

Names scrolled by like an idol event banner.

Shiraishi An.
Azusawa Kohane.
Shinonome Akito.
Hanasato Minori.
Kamishiro Rui.

Every name he’d memorized from in-game events and card banners—

Now saved in his phone.

Real names.
Real profiles.
Real chat logs.

Real people.

His mouth went dry.

“Hey mister…”

Yuu jumped, spinning around.

Her mom was still standing in his doorway, arms crossed.

“You’re gonna be late.”

“Ah—! Y-Yes, I’m going,” Yuu stammered, heart thudding.

His mother rolled her eyes and walked away, muttering something about “protagonist syndrome.”

Yuu grabbed his uniform, still half in disbelief, and checked the mirror.

It fit perfectly.

Too perfectly.

“…Okay,” he said to himself, voice quiet. “This isn’t just some Sekai…”

He slid his phone into his pocket.

“This is the real world. Right?”

But no matter how hard he tried to believe it, one truth pulsed in his mind like a steady BPM:

Nothing about this is normal.

After scarfing down a quick breakfast and ignoring his mom muttering about “anime boy speedruns”—Yuu slipped into his shoes and sprinted out the door.

His destination?

Kamiyama High.

>Timeskip to Kamiyama High<

Every step toward the school gate felt heavier than it should. The streets were clean.

The air was a little too crisp.

The blue sky overhead? Picture-perfect.

Almost like a backdrop.

And waiting just in front of the school’s gate.

“You’re finally here. Took you long enough.”

Aoyagi Toya stood with his arms crossed, dressed in the familiar Kamiyama High uniform. His sharp gaze met Yuu’s with faint irritation, though his tone lacked any real bite.

Yuu froze mid-step. “S-Sorry.”

Strict and blunt.

Just like in the game.

No.

Not the game.

This wasn’t a cutscene.

This was real.

And yet, his brain couldn’t unsee it.

Before he could spiral, another voice chimed in.

“Now now… Let’s save the sermon for later and head to the gymnasium.”

Yuu’s eyes widened.

Shiraishi An.

She stood just behind Toya, her usual bright energy intact, ponytail bouncing slightly as she walked up beside them.

He stared for a second too long.

“...Shiraishi An,” he blurted out.

An blinked, puzzled. “Yeah? What is it all of a sudden? Saying my full name like that.”

Ah crap. I said that out loud.

Yuu waved his hands frantically. “N-No, nothing! Sorry!”

Toya raised a brow.

Yuu forced an awkward laugh, rubbing the back of his neck.

As the three of them began walking across the school grounds, Yuu took a quick glance around. Students were chatting, stretching, heading to the gym—like a normal first day. Too normal. Scripted, even.

And yet…

He was the only thing that didn’t feel scripted.

What’s the current me’s relation to these units?

They spoke to him casually, like he belonged. Like he’d always been here. But he didn’t remember joining this world. He didn’t remember logging in. And worst of all—

He didn’t know what came next.

His thoughts flashed back to her voice.

Not An.

Not Toya.

Her.

“You’re not supposed to exist here...
...Yet it found you.”

“Say, everyone…” Yuu began as they walked toward the gymnasium, trying to sound casual. “We’re first years, right?”

Both An and Toya paused, then looked at him like he’d just asked if the sky was blue.

“We are,” Toya replied flatly.

An tilted her head. “Do you not remember your section? You and Toya are in the same class.”

“A-Are we?” Yuu gave a nervous laugh. “Haha… Thanks for reminding me.”

An’s eyes narrowed. “…Are you okay?”

Yuu stiffened.

“It feels like…” she continued, brows furrowing slightly. “Like you just lost your memory or something. Like you don’t remember us.”

Yuu scrambled for a response. “I-I guess I was just… uh… overthinking school stuff!”

Shiraishi raised an eyebrow.

Then grinned.

“Oh? Is that so? Well~ we’ve been friends since middle school, you know. If you need a little refresher, I can quiz you on our embarrassing moments.”

She leaned in a little, teasing.

“Yes, please,” Yuu said automatically, voice too eager.

Smooth. Real smooth.

Toya exhaled beside them, not even bothering to mask his annoyance.

“You two,” he said. “How about keeping quiet when the teacher is speaking on stage?”

Yuu flinched. “Sorry.”

The three of them stepped into the gymnasium, joining the rest of the students taking their seats. The crowd buzzed quietly, footsteps echoing against polished wood, murmurs filling the air.

It was almost too normal.

Yuu followed along silently, eyes darting across the space.

Rows of chairs. Teachers onstage. Banners on the walls. Kamiyama High’s emblem gleamed under the ceiling lights.

It looked exactly like a rhythm game school event backdrop.

But this isn’t the Sekai I know…

He clutched the strap of his bag tightly.

The story was even made up. This whole setting? It doesn’t exist in the game. The characters—An, Toya—sure, they’re here. But this place... this timeline... this version of their lives?

It was like someone had fabricated a perfect school AU and inserted him into it.

I don’t belong here. I wasn’t even part of the canon.

The longer he stayed, the louder that truth became.

Yuu’s eyes wandered to the teachers on stage. One of them began speaking into the mic, but the words barely registered.

His focus shifted.

Up, high above the banners, toward the catwalk lights.

For just a split second, something moved.

Not a person.

A silhouette.

Like a glitch in the air.

Gone in a blink.

His heart skipped a beat.

“...I’m being watched.”

"A variable."

The voice echoed from above—quiet, detached, almost lazy.
Yuu snapped his head upward toward the catwalks.

There was someone there.

No, something.

A silhouette suspended in stillness.

And around him… time had stopped.

The murmurs of students vanished. The teacher mid-sentence froze, mouth open. Even An and Toya were perfectly still beside him, caught in mid-breath like paused animations.

Yuu stood up so fast his chair scraped the floor, but no one moved. No one reacted.

“Who... are you!?” he called up.

The silhouette chuckled.

A hand gestured vaguely like it was brushing dust off a storybook.

“Hahh… stop overreacting and being confused. I’m trying to create a good plot here.”

“I’m asking who you are!”

“…You can call me the god of this Sekai.”

Yuu’s face scrunched in disbelief. “That’s… ridiculous. What kind of stupid—"

“Bring me back to the real world. Now!”

A sigh came from above. The shape shifted slightly, like they were reclining in midair.

“...How annoying.”

The voice paused, then added—flatly—

“How about this? I will bring you back. In exchange, you complete every stage.”

Yuu narrowed his eyes. “What?”

“Every stage. Easy to Expert. No skips. No assists. All clear.”

His stomach sank. “...That’s impossible.”

“Can’t do it? That sucks, huh. I guess you’ll be staying here forever then.”

Are you kidding me?

There are 552 songs in total...

Multiply that by 5 difficulty levels... that's—

He did the math in his head.

2760 stages.

“YOU EXPECT ME TO FULL COMBO OVER TWO THOUSAND STAGES!?”

The silhouette shrugged.

“I expect you to clear them. But full combos sound spicier for the narrative. Good luck, protagonist.”

Yuu’s jaw clenched. “What do you even want from me? What’s the point of this!?”

The figure leaned forward slightly.

And for just a moment, he wasn’t a shadow anymore.

Yuu saw his face.

It was—

His own.

Or something close to it. Distorted.

As if someone had taken a mirror and shattered it, then reassembled the pieces to look almost like him, but twisted.

Amused.

Detached from consequence.

Yuu staggered back a step.

“You should be thanking me,” the god said with a grin. “You’re not just a fan anymore. You’re part of the story now.”

And then—

Snap.

The world surged back to life.

Voices. Motion. Light. Reality crashing back like a beat drop.

Toya nudged his shoulder. “...Yuu?”

Yuu blinked.

An was waving at him with concern. “Hey. You okay?”

He looked around.

The ceremony was still ongoing. No one noticed anything strange.

But his hands?

They were still shaking.

Complete every stage…

Or stay here forever.

“Can I go to the clinic for a second…?” Yuu asked, eyes still fixed on the floor.

His voice barely rose above the ambient buzz of the gym.

Shiraishi An turned toward him, concern softening her tone.

“S-Sure… Want me to guide you?”

Yuu forced a smile. “I’m fine… I know where it is.”

Of course he did.

He was a Project Sekai fan. A hardcore one. He'd memorized half the game's map layouts from event story scenes and rhythm maps alone.

Unthinkable.

He made his way down the hallway with heavy steps, turning each corner by muscle memory.

A left at the vending machine.

A right past the literature room.

Straight through the quiet wing.

Then, the clinic.

Empty, Dim, A single bed, Clean sheets, Sterile lighting.

Familiar, but eerily quiet.

Yuu closed the door behind him and stood motionless just a step inside.

The silence was crushing.

"What now…?"

He said it aloud, to no one.

The question hung in the air.

He took a shaky breath and sat down on the edge of the bed.

His hands trembled again. He clenched them into fists.

"Complete every stage or stay here forever," he muttered. "What kind of lunatic condition is that?"

He leaned forward, elbows on his knees.

He stared down at his palms.

Callused fingers.

Rhythm-game calluses.

Real now.

Not from hours of swiping glass, but from motion, pressure, resistance.

Reality here had weight.

And the songs?

He remembered the glitchy one.

The corrupted rhythm. The stage shattering.

Even now, fragments of that melody clawed at the back of his skull like a bugged track still looping in his subconscious.

“This isn’t a dream. This is something else.”

Something deeper than Sekai.

Something he’d never read about.

Never unlocked.

Something broken.

He leaned back against the wall, staring up at the white ceiling.

“Am I really supposed to play through over two thousand stages… just to go home?”

He closed his eyes.

“How do I even start?”

Just then, a soft beep echoed through the quiet room.

Yuu opened his eyes.

In front of him hovered a faint blue holographic interface—sleek, translucent, familiar.

The Project Sekai UI.

But… different.

Sharper. More polished. More real than any screen he’d ever swiped.

“An updated version, huh…” he muttered, brow furrowing.

He let out a long, exhausted sigh and glanced sideways at the mirror on the clinic wall.

His reflection stared back—rumpled uniform, tired eyes, body caught between disbelief and reluctant acceptance.

“Fine,” he said, locking eyes with himself. “Whoever you are… whatever twisted thing you’ve programmed this to be…”

He stepped forward.

“I’ll beat this game of yours.”

His finger hovered over the glowing [Update Complete – Launch Now] button.

And with one breath, one final moment of hesitation—

He pressed it.

Everything blinked.

The clinic vanished.

The air shifted.

The light changed.

Home.

Yuu found himself sitting in bed again, morning sunlight spilling through the blinds.

His phone buzzed.

But this time, it wasn't Toya's message.

It was a plain reminder alert.

"Wake up! It's time to go to school!"

He stared at it blankly.

The dream?

The Sekai?

The glitching Miku?

The god with his face?

Still real.

Still echoing.

But now buried under layers of mundane normalcy.

Yuu set his phone down and exhaled, slowly swinging his legs off the bed again.

He wasn't the protagonist here.

Not the center of any unit or story route.

Not a canon Event SSR.

"Today," he whispered, "…I'll be an extra."

Just a background character.

With one goal.

Go home.

Chapter End Notes

Yuu Hazuki doesn’t want to be the hero.

He doesn’t want a spotlight, a character arc, or emotional climaxes.

But now he’s trapped in a rhythm world with rules written by something else entirely, and survival might require him to play along.

Thank you for reading Chapter 2 of Beyond the Stage Lights.

Chapter 4: A New Clean State

Everything settled into a rhythm.

Kamiyama High.
Go home.
Clear three songs.
Repeat.

Yuu Hazuki followed that routine like it was doctrine—every day blending into the next.

Wake up, put on the uniform, exchange minimal words with familiar faces, and keep his head down during class.

He didn't try to stand out.

Didn't speak to the canon characters unless spoken to.

"Interacting would break the story," he muttered once to himself.
"Let them follow their script. I'm just passing through."

And so, he lived like an extra.

An NPC who existed just off-frame, silently obeying the invisible director.

Three songs a day.

Sometimes they were easy, other times brutally fast.
The stages changed: school rooftop, train station, cluttered bedroom, underwater alleyway.
Each one glitched slightly around the edges, like a half-finished dream.

He never failed.
He never smiled either.

Three months passed.

Only 14 stages cleared.

"That can't be right," he whispered one evening, scrolling through the interface.
"I've played over 200 songs. I… I should've cleared more…"

But the Sekai didn't care about effort.

It only cared about completion.

Each stage demanded understanding, not just reflex.

He had to feel the songs. Know their message. Their emotional arc. Their "story."

And he didn't.

“I don’t belong here. I can’t understand something that isn’t mine.”

So the system rejected him.

He barely noticed his body changing.

His legs had grown stronger.

His reflexes faster.

Posture sharper.

Arms more toned from constant motion, performance, dance, gesture.

A rhythm game was no longer just fingers tapping glass.

Now, it was everything.

Muscle.

Flow.

Presence.

He hadn’t looked in the mirror for weeks.

But if he did, he’d realize—

He didn’t look like an extra anymore.

That morning, Yuu paused before the mirror.

It was the first time he’d really looked in weeks, maybe months.

The reflection that stared back was… strange.

“I’ve grown taller, huh…” he murmured.

His voice barely echoed in the room.

His uniform shirt fit tighter around the shoulders than he remembered.

The sleeves stopped just a little shorter on his wrists.

His posture, once slouched from hours hunched over a laptop, was straighter now.

Natural.

He raised a hand, flexed his fingers.

Just steadiness.

Discipline.

From rhythm games.

He almost laughed at the absurdity of it.

Playing through choreographed illusions, tapping in sync with invisible beats, yet it had reshaped him. In silence. Without fanfare.

“Maybe I should ask them to buy me a new uniform…”

Them.

His parents.

Or… the parents in this world.

Whoever they were.

They cared, in a distant, constructed sort of way.

Played their roles well. Cooked meals. Left reminder notes. Gave hugs when he looked tired.

Maybe it was fake.

Maybe it wasn’t.

Does it matter if it’s programmed?

If it feels warm?

Yuu looked back at the mirror.

There was a thinness to his face still—a holdover from college nights with skipped meals and late projects—but he was no longer frail.

He sighed and turned away from the mirror.

Another day.

Another three songs.

“Let’s get this over with.”

He stepped out of his bedroom, school bag slung loosely over one shoulder. The hallway light filtered softly through the curtains, and the smell of breakfast still lingered faintly in the air.

Downstairs, she was already waiting.

“Mother, I’m going now,” Yuu called, slipping on his shoes.

“Wait, Yuu.”

He paused mid-step. “Hm?”

“You forgot your lunch box.”

She held it out with a warm smile. Her hands, gentle and familiar—crafted by memory or fabrication, he couldn't tell anymore.

"Ah… thanks," he said, reaching for it.

But just before their fingers met—

"By the way," she said, voice light. "Are you really… Yuu?"

His breath caught.

Only for a second.

But it was enough.

"I mean," she continued casually, "you've gotten taller now… Have you been working out lately? I also noticed your uniform looks tight on you."

Yuu blinked, tension draining from his shoulders.

"Ahh… I was about to say that as well."

She giggled.

"Fufu~ You look like one of those actors I watch on television and YouTube. Are you perhaps going to become an entertainer?"

Yuu chuckled softly, rubbing the back of his neck.

"Mother, you flatter me."

He took the lunchbox from her hands and, without thinking, leaned in for a hug.

It was brief.

Warm.

Familiar.

He wasn't sure if he was holding onto her… or the illusion.

"I'm going now."

"Take care!~" she chimed brightly, waving as he stepped out the door.

And just like that, another ordinary morning passed.

Yuu arrived at Kamiyama High, stepping through the school gates like a background actor returning to set. The halls welcomed him with their usual buzz—shoes against tile, lockers clanging, the occasional laugh bouncing off sunlit windows.

He walked with practiced muscle memory.

Head down.

Gaze neutral.

His destination: Class 1-B.

The classroom he shared with names he'd memorized long ago from unit banners and character stories, Kusanagi Nene and Aoyagi Toya.

Yuu never spoke to them.

Not unless he had to.

During group work, he did his share.

No more.

No less.

He never lingered.

Never forced bonds.

Never broke script.

His goal was simple:

Avoid attachments.

Clear the stages.

Go home.

But that routine cracked—just slightly—that day.

It happened at lunch.

Yuu stood, sliding his chair back with the soft scrape of metal legs. His eyes were already set on the cafeteria exit. One hand casually adjusted the strap of his bag.

Then—

A shadow blocked his path.

"Wait."

A voice. Calm. Flat. But firm.

Yuu blinked.

Standing in front of him was Toya Aoyagi.

For a second, the world just… continued.

Chairs scraping.

Classmates chatting.

Wrappers rustling.

Neither of them spoke.

Finally, Yuu offered a neutral,

“Hm?”

Their eyes met.

Toya’s expression was unreadable, as usual.

A mask of indifference honed by years of restraint.

But something in his gaze was searching.

“You didn’t send the reference for today’s report.”

“Ah… sorry. I’ll send them later.”

“And,” Toya added, “how did you rise to the top rank so fast?”

Yuu blinked again.

“…What?”

“You’re quiet. You don’t show off. But your scores… They’re top rank on the latest score exams.”

A beat passed.

Yuu shrugged.

“I guess I’m not the type to talk around.”

Toya tilted his head slightly, like he was adjusting an internal theory.

“Hmm. How curious.”

Yuu mentally groaned.

He forgot one thing about this world.

Rivalry.

Toya stepped aside, just enough to turn toward the classroom door.

“Are you heading to the cafeteria?”

“I am,” Yuu replied slowly.

“Good. Let’s go together.”

“H-Huh? Why?”

“Because I’m going to buy lunch too.”

“I’m just grabbing a drink,” Yuu muttered, already half-turned.

“Then we’ll head there together.”

Read the room already.

I want to be alone.

But it was too late.

Yuu had already failed his daily stealth stat roll.

And so, for the first time in weeks, he walked to the cafeteria…

with someone.

Just as the two of them were heading toward the cafeteria, they bumped into someone rounding the corner.

“Huh? Toya? And… who are you?”

Yuu froze.

Standing in front of them was Shiraishi An.

Toya, completely unbothered, gestured with his hand.

“My classmate. We were heading to the cafeteria together.”

An blinked, then raised an eyebrow, clearly surprised.

“Hmm~ That’s strange. Most people find Toya hard to approach.”

She turned her gaze toward Yuu, sharp but not unfriendly.

“Well… he approached me first, so…”

“I see,” she said, then extended her hand. “I’m Shiraishi An, by the way.”

“I know you,” Yuu replied reflexively, then quickly added, “Well—I’ve heard about you from people. Miss Disciplinary Committee, right?”

She let out a short laugh.

“I see…”

She turned back toward Toya.

“By the way, Toya, when do you even study? You’re always at the café after school. And you spend most of your days off with Akito, don’t you?”

Uwah… Did I just interact with a random event scene?

“Not every day,” Toya replied coolly. “If you review a little every day, you don’t need to study as much before exams.”

“Ugh… review…” An groaned.

“You sound exactly like Akito,” Toya said.

“Excuse me? Don’t compare me to him. I don’t guess on tests. I attempt to study when exams come around!”

“Attempting to study isn’t the same as actually studying.”

Yuu stood between the banter like a non-playable character witnessing a scripted exchange. Then—

“Speaking of which,” An said, turning toward Yuu. “You beat Toya on the last exam, right? I wonder who that top scorer was…”

Yuu’s face went pale.

Urgk…

An blinked again.

“Eh? You were top one?!”

Before he could reply, Toya smoothly interrupted.

“Anyway. Time is running. Let’s go, Hazuki.”

“Y-Yeah.”

The two of them continued down the hallway, leaving Shiraishi behind with a confused look.

Yuu let out a quiet breath as they walked.

I see... even if I’m not interacting with them, the story continues on its own.

Just like an event cutscene playing out regardless of my presence…

And for the first time in a while, Yuu smiled.

I’m glad.

But then—

“Speaking of the café…” Toya said suddenly, keeping his gaze forward, “how about you send me the report reference after school? We’ll go there together.”

“Eh? Why?”

Yuu blinked, clearly caught off guard.

An invite?

From Toya Aoyagi?

Of all people?

This wasn't in the script.

Ahh crap… Is it because I interacted with a character?

Yuu mentally cursed as he rubbed the back of his neck, trying to reset his expression.
He cleared his throat.

"Well—"

"Yo! Toya!"

A loud voice cut him off.

Yuu's heart dropped.

He didn't even have to look.

He knew who it was.

"Hm? And who's this?" the new voice asked with a cheerful edge.

Yuu slowly turned his head.

Shinonome Akito.

messy orange hair

voice is tough and powerful.

Part of Vivid BAD SQUAD

Canon character #2.

Yuu's face froze.

"Classmate," Toya replied flatly.

Akito leaned in a little.

"Oho? Nice to meet you," he grinned. "I'm Shinonome Akito. Thanks for taking care of Toya."

Yuu blinked. "Y-Yeah…"

What is going on? Did I just trigger another random scene?!

Why are these two even in the same hallway at the same time?! Is this some group event script running in real time?!

“By the way, Toya~” Akito said, elbowing his friend, “wanna go to the arcade later? I heard there’s a new machine there!”

Toya gave a sharp shake of his head. “Not now. I’m going somewhere.”

“Oh? Where?” Akito leaned in. “The usual café?”

“Yeah. With him.” He gestured toward Yuu.

Akito’s eyes lit up in exaggerated curiosity.

“I see~ Then why don’t I come too?”

Toya didn’t even flinch.

“No. You’ll distract both of us.”

“Ehh~ You wound me!” Akito clutched his chest like a rejected anime sidekick.

Yuu’s mind raced.

Why is this happening? I kept my head down. I stayed quiet. I was just trying to go to the cafeteria!

He didn’t say any of that out loud, of course.

Instead, he gave the safest reply he could think of:

“I… just have to send Toya a file. That’s all.”

Akito grinned.

“I see, I see~ Well, you better watch out. If he starts giving you study lectures, you’ll fall asleep with your eyes open.”

Toya deadpanned, “That’s only happened to you.”

Akito laughed and waved them off.

“Fine, fine. I won’t crash your date.”

It’s not a date, Yuu screamed internally.

But the scene was already moving on.

Toya stepped ahead, glancing back.

“Let’s go.”

Yuu followed, expression blank, soul exhausted.

This is bad…

The more I interact… the more the script warps.

The more they notice me.

This isn’t a background role anymore.

I’m starting to get… pulled into the narrative.

And so, they proceeded down the corridor.

Heading to the cafeteria.

But—

Why is the cafeteria so long?

It was never this far before.

Each step echoed just a little louder than the last.

The fluorescent lights above hummed. The hallway seemed to stretch… and stretch. Every turn just revealed another hallway. Another wall. Another set of windows that all looked the same.

Yuu tried not to look too concerned.

He cast a glance at Toya, who walked forward without hesitation, calm as always. Not a flicker of doubt on his face.

As if this distance had always existed.

As if he wasn’t noticing the shift at all.

Just then, a figure appeared around the next corner.

She nearly bumped into them.

"Aoyagi-kun, hello."

It was Azusawa Kohane.

Yuu blinked in surprise. Why is she here?

"Azusawa," Toya greeted her with a slight nod. "Visiting again?"

"Y-Yeah," she smiled sheepishly. "I had to drop something off for An."

"Typical," Toya said, sighing quietly.

Kohane turned toward Yuu, finally noticing the unfamiliar face beside him.

Her gaze was soft, curious—not pushy.

"Ah, sorry! I didn’t see you there. I'm Azusawa Kohane. You?"

Yuu hesitated.

He kept his eyes low, trying to look as forgettable as possible.

But Kohane waited patiently.

Eventually, he exhaled.

"...Yuu. Hazuki."

Her smile brightened just slightly.

"It’s nice to meet you, Hazuki-kun."

Yuu gave a small nod. Polite. Minimal.

Kohane. Azusawa Kohane, in front of me. In Kamiyama High.

Reality is getting thinner by the day.

"Are you two headed to lunch?" she asked, glancing toward the hallway.

"Yeah," Toya replied. "We were just on our way."

"Then I’ll get out of your way. Don’t let me keep you."

"You're not," Toya replied flatly.

Kohane giggled at his usual tone. "Still blunt as ever."

With a quick wave, she stepped aside, letting them pass.

Yuu gave her a polite bow of the head and walked forward. Quiet. Measured.

Just far enough not to be followed.

When they finally reached the vending machines, Yuu seized his chance.

"I'll just… grab a drink," he muttered.

Toya nodded, already distracted by his phone and probably Kohane's earlier message about the café’s new parfait set.

Yuu’s fingers moved without thinking, pressing whatever button his thumb landed on. The drink dropped into the slot. He snatched it and turned away.

Walked.

Fast.

Away from Toya.

Away from canon.

Back through the hallway. Past fading echoes. Past peeling event flags.

Back to Class 1-B.

Just as he turned the corner, he nearly bumped into someone.

Long, grayish-green hair. Pale. Small frame.

She jolted back with a quiet gasp, stepping aside immediately.

“Ah… sorry,” she mumbled, avoiding eye contact, before briskly walking away.

Yuu blinked.

His hand was still half-raised, as if to catch the collision.

He turned slightly, watching her fade into the background.

Nene Kusanagi…

Right. She’s in my class too.

He sighed.

This cast list is getting crowded.

Back at his desk, he dropped into his seat.

No more surprises. That was the plan.

Lunch passed. Afternoon classes blurred.

No glitches. No divine interventions. Just the rhythm of a quiet life.

When the final bell rang, Yuu started packing up.

He didn’t even flinch when Toya called out to him from across the room.

“Let’s go.”

Yuu just nodded.

Café scene. Initiate.

He followed Toya through the now-familiar halls, through the sunlit streets of the city. The sky above was already shifting orange, casting long shadows across the pavement.

When they arrived at the café, Yuu spotted their usual booth by the window, already cleaned and waiting.

But just as he stepped inside—

“What are you three doing here?” Toya’s tone flattened with irritation.

Yuu paused.

Then he saw them.

Shinonome Akito, Shiraishi An, and Azusawa Kohane.

All were seated at another table nearby.

Their drinks were already on the table.

Orders in.

Comfortably chatting.

Akito grinned. “What do you mean ‘what are we doing here?’ It’s a café."

Toya crossed his arms. “You said you weren’t coming.”

“I didn’t follow you,” Akito shrugged. “It’s just a coincidence. Total fate.”

An waved. “I actually texted him. Told him I’d be here after practice.”

“Sorry!” Kohane said sheepishly, holding her cup in both hands.

Toya let out a long exhale through his nose.

Yuu, meanwhile, was collapsing inside.

It’s okay, Yuu. It’s just a small script. Just a side event. This is manageable.

He slowly made his way to their booth, Toya walking beside him with visible annoyance.

You’re not part of the story, remember? You’re just a guest. Just a placeholder. Don’t get pulled in.

He took his seat.

Looked out the window.

Just… survive this conversation…

Chapter 5: Area Conversation with Vivid BAD SQUAD

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

The café was quiet.

Golden afternoon light spilled in through the window beside him, soft against the wood grain of the table. Yuu Hazuki sat at the edge of it all, one hand cradling a lukewarm drink he hadn't touched since he sat down.

His seat by the window had been chosen on instinct, a place that looked like neutral ground. Background noise.

Safe.

Now?

All four members of Vivid BAD SQUAD sat within five meters of him.

And somehow—somehow, Yuu Hazuki, background NPC and rhythm game recluse, was a part of their table.

He felt Toya's gaze from across the booth. Not accusing. Not hostile. Just... analyzing. Measuring.

Stop looking at me like I'm a limited-time SSR, please.

Yuu sank slightly lower in his seat.

Across the table, Shiraishi An tilted her head, sipping casually from her drink as she rested her cheek against one hand.

"So, Hazuki-kun," she asked, her tone light, "what kind of music do you listen to?"

Yuu blinked. "Uh... a bit of everything."

Her brow lifted with interest. "Everything? That's interesting."

Akito leaned across the table, grinning. "Do you play an instrument or something? You don't really look like it."

Yuu hesitated. "I guess...I can play guitar?"

It was technically true.

Back in college, he used to strum around with chords and covers during study breaks. Nothing impressive.

Shiraishi's face lit up. "Guitar, huh? I'd love to hear you play sometime!"

Yuu chuckled awkwardly and scratched the back of his neck. "Haha... well, I'm kinda rusty. Haven't touched it in a while."

A faint truth, at least. His old acoustic guitar was probably still sitting in the corner of his real-world bedroom. Assuming that place still existed.

"Acoustic or electric?" Akito asked, resting his chin on his palm.

"Acoustic," Yuu replied. "Mostly. I used to mess around with covers."

An smiled. "That's chill. Music's always been part of me."

Yeah, Yuu thought bitterly. I know. I've read your stories. I've seen your 4-star cards. You once said the same thing at a festival side event two years ago.

He sipped his drink—now reduced to mildly warm sugar water—and tried to shrink into the rhythm of their voices.

Across the table, Azusawa Kohane looked up at Yuu.

"Do you perform?"

Yuu nearly choked.

"N-No. No, nothing like that. Not really my thing."

Toya studied him. "Strange. You seem comfortable enough around people."

That's because this is all scripted, Yuu almost said. Because none of you are real.

But instead, he offered a shrug. "I prefer listening."

That seemed to be a good enough answer—for now. The conversation shifted away from him, flowing into easier currents: café recommendations, practice sessions, upcoming local events. Yuu let their voices drift past like background music.

It was almost normal again.

Almost.

Until—

"You're not part of any crew, right?" An asked, her gaze sliding back toward him.

Yuu blinked. "Huh?"

"I mean, you're not tied to any livehouses or groups," she said, stirring her drink idly. "You've got good taste. You should totally swing by the event stage sometime."

"Speaking of which," Akito chimed in, "you could totally perform at An's café sometime!"

Yuu gave a stiff, strained smile. "I'll... think about it."

Please let that be the end of it.

But Kohane tilted her head slightly, eyes soft and curious. "You know... you don't talk much, but I get this feeling from you."

A chill ran up Yuu's spine.

No no no. Don't say it. Don't trigger a support route. I swear—

"You really love music, don't you?"

Yuu's breath caught.

His gaze flicked up—met hers.

And for just a moment, it felt like something shifted. Like the air had changed around them. Something small and watching... now alert.

Don't react.

Don't give it power.

He exhaled. Carefully. "I guess you could say that."

Neutral.

Safe.

Kohane's smile warmed. "That's really nice."

A gentle silence followed.

Not awkward.

Just thoughtful.

Yuu dared a glance around the table.

Their faces, animated, sincere, bright with shared passion and years of dreams.

The kind of expressions that belonged to people who knew where they were going.

And in that quiet, something terrible settled into his chest.

He knew them.

He'd seen them cry onstage. He'd seen them stand under fireworks. He'd pulled their voice cards and rerun their stories just to feel something during long nights alone.

But now?

Now they were talking to him.

Laughing with him.

Inviting him in.

That made it worse.

Because it felt real.

Because it was warm.

And because—deep down—he was starting to forget how it used to feel, being alone.

"It seems we've been off-topic for a while," Toya said suddenly, his voice calm but direct as he turned to Yuu. "Hazuki, can you send me the reference for the report?"

Yuu blinked. For a moment, he'd completely forgotten why they were even at the café in the first place.

Right. The reference list.

"Ah... yeah," he muttered, pulling out his phone with a practiced flick. "That's why we came here, huh."

He quickly scrolled through his notes, attached the document, and sent it to Toya's contact with barely a pause.

"There. Sent," he added, setting his phone face down on the table, hoping no one noticed the slight tremble in his fingers.

Toya gave a nod, already swiping through the message with that same mechanical focus. "Thanks."

Around them, the café buzzed with casual conversation again. An was teasing Akito over something about his last performance slip-up. Kohane sat quietly sipping her drink, her eyes shifting gently between her friends, a quiet smile on her face.

Everything seemed... fine.

Yuu leaned back slightly in his chair and let out a soft sigh, almost too quiet to be heard.

Just another scene. Just another day. Just another script I've accidentally wandered into.

He chuckled to himself under his breath, murmuring, "Hah... I sure am lucky to be sitting here with Vivid BAD SQUAD... If any players or fandom fans saw this, they'd probably envy me and try to kill me."

The words left his mouth before he could stop them.

Akito's head tilted. "Huh? What was that?"

Yuu froze.

Oh crap. I said that out loud?!

He forced a quick laugh, waving his hand with nervous energy. "N-No, nothing! I just meant—uh, that Vivid BAD SQUAD is an amazing unit! Like... seriously! They are all so talented!"

A moment of silence.

Four pairs of eyes stared at him.

Then An leaned forward with a teasing grin. "Oh? Didn't we already tell you we're a unit?"

"Yeah," Akito added with a smirk, "we've only been talking about live stages and café performances this whole time."

Kohane nodded quietly, sipping her drink. Even Toya gave him a look that hovered between suspicion and amusement.

Yuu laughed awkwardly. "Eh?! Seriously?! You're the Vivid BAD SQUAD?"

He widened his eyes in fake surprise like an amateur actor in a school play.

I already know. Of course I know. But right now, let's just... pretend.

An burst into laughter. "Wow, you really don't pay attention, huh?"

Akito leaned closer. "You sure you're not messing with us?"

Yuu raised both hands. "Nope! Not messing. Just... clueless."

Toya shook his head lightly. "You're strange."

That was the only word he offered.

But for some reason, it didn't sound insulting. Just... observant.

Yuu sat there, heart still lightly pounding beneath the surface.

His cover was holding for now.

But one mistake. One stray word. One line too close to the truth...

And the script might fall apart.

"Uhm..." Kohane's voice was soft, hesitant, but warm. "If you want... You can come watch us practice sometime."

Yuu blinked.

"Really?"

Her nod was small, almost shy. "Yeah. I mean, it's not a big deal."

An leaned her elbows onto the table, grinning. "What, you interested now? You're not just a background NPC after all, huh?"

Yuu nearly flinched.

I was trying to be exactly that.

"I just thought it might be interesting," he lied smoothly, swallowing down his panic. "To see how you guys work as a unit."

"Good." Akito leaned back in his chair. "You can finally see me in my natural habitat."

Don't worry, you're scary enough when it comes to music.

You're annoying," Toya muttered without looking up from his phone.

Kohane laughed softly. "You're always welcome, Hazuki-kun."

Yuu managed a smile, but his hands clenched beneath the table.

This is bad. This is very, very bad.

I'm getting pulled in again.

First a chat, now an invitation. The deeper he got, the more the world wrapped around him—like it wanted him to stay. Like it knew how to make him forget.

Forget that he didn't belong here.

Forget that it wasn't real.

Forget that he had a mission.

Still... he couldn't say no.

Because somewhere, buried beneath the fear and hesitation, a part of him wanted to see them practice.

o watch a performance not from a screen, not behind an avatar, but right there—breathing, moving, real.

"...Okay," he said quietly. "I'll come by."

An gave him a playful thumbs up. "You better not flake on us!"

Akito was already making plans.

Kohane smiled like it was the most natural thing in the world.

Yuu looked down at the untouched drink in front of him.

“Well then, I gotta go.”

Yuu stood, grabbing his bag in one swift motion.

The chair scraped softly against the wooden floor as he pushed it back.

He slung the bag over one shoulder, offering the group a half-smile—just enough to look polite. Not too much to look attached.

“Already?” An asked, eyebrows raised.

“Yeah,” Yuu replied, keeping his tone easy. “Got something to do. Homework, probably. You know.”

He didn’t.

Not really.

Kohane gave a gentle nod. “Thanks for hanging out.”

“Same to you,” he said, pausing only a moment before turning toward the café exit.

As he walked away, he could feel their eyes still on him.

Not suspicious.

Not hostile.

Just… curious.

The more I try to stay background, the more this world refuses to let me.

The bell above the door jingled softly as he stepped outside.

Evening painted Kamiyama in golden hues. Long shadows stretched across the sidewalks, and the quiet hum of the city felt distant, dreamlike. Almost like a scene from an event story cutscene.

Yuu exhaled.

That’s enough canon for one day.

He pulled out his phone and opened the rhythm interface again.

Three more songs.

Just three.

Then sleep.

Reset.

Repeat.

But just as he stepped up to the gate outside his house—

“Hey, you.”

The voice was calm. Clear. Almost too clear.

Yuu turned, eyes already narrowing—

—and froze.

Icy-blue eyes.

Long, navy hair, worn loose and drifting in the breeze like a music video moment.

Her voice had that calm, melodic harmony—gentle, but piercing.

"…Are you Yuu Hazuki?"

His mouth went dry.

No way…

Ichika Hoshino.

Chapter End Notes

Did I nail it? The character's personality? I hope you guys enjoyed it! Make sure to share this fic if it satisfies you!

Chapter 6: The Protagonist

The air stood still.

Not the breeze. Not the murmur of passing footsteps or the café's soft ambience.

No—this stillness clung only to Yuu Hazuki. Like time had paused just long enough to hold its breath.

"…Are you Yuu Hazuki?"

The voice was soft.

Uncertain, almost, but it pierced through the world like a pin to glass.

Yuu turned, slowly.

She stood there, framed by the muted gray light outside the café.

Just as the stories described her—calm, collected, gentle in a way that felt quiet rather than weak.

He opened his mouth.

Then closed it again.

He forced a laugh.

"Uh… yeah. That's me."

Her expression didn't change much—just a small furrow of the brow. Not suspicion. Not surprise. Something in between.

"I see," she said softly, taking a step forward. "Sorry if that was strange. I just… heard about you."

Yuu's breath hitched slightly.

Heard about me?

"From who?" he asked, cautious.

She met his gaze.

"…Miku."

That name struck him like a dropped chord in a quiet room.

Before he could reply, the first drops of rain splashed across the pavement outside.

Then, without warning, the skies opened up—thick sheets of rain cascading like the world had hit a dramatic cue.

"We should get inside," she said quickly.

“Y-Yeah.”

They dashed through the doorway just as the downpour intensified, clothes damp, hair clinging to skin.

Inside, the warmth and scent of coffee wrapped around them like a blanket. Light jazz hummed from an old speaker in the corner. Familiar.

Too familiar.

Just then, a voice called out from behind the counter.

“Oh my? Who’s this?”

Yuu flinched.

His mother stood there, wiping her hands with a towel, blinking in surprise. She stared between them—his rain-drenched form and the girl beside him.

Yuu opened his mouth, but words stuck halfway in his throat.

“…Friend,” he muttered.

Ichika gave a polite bow. “Sorry for the intrusion. I didn’t mean to cause trouble.”

His mother’s eyes lit up with amusement. “Oh wow~ Our Yuu-kun brought someone home? Really?”

Yuu groaned, already seeing where this was going. “Mom, don’t make it sound like I’m some kind of loner.”

“You are,” she replied bluntly, walking over and handing Ichika the towel.

“Thank you,” Ichika said, smiling softly.

“And here I thought you were bringing home a daughter-in-law,” his mom added with a wink.

Yuu let out a strangled groan. “Why are you like this?"

But then, he heard it.

A quiet sound beside him.

Ichika’s laugh.

Small. Breathlike. Not loud enough to turn heads, but real.

Warm.

Not the rehearsed politeness she used with strangers.

A genuine laugh.

He glanced sideways, catching her expression in profile.

There was something different in her eyes now, like a little weight had been set down for just a moment.

“Anyway,” Yuu said, stepping away from the counter with a forced casual tone,

“We’re going to my room now.”

His mother raised an eyebrow, lips twitching in amusement. “Oh? Okay then…”

Yuu didn’t wait for more teasing.

He led Ichika down the hallway and up the narrow stairs, the creak of each step soft beneath their feet. His bedroom door clicked open, and the two slipped inside.

As soon as he shut it, Yuu leaned back against the door with a sigh, locking it out of habit.

“Right,” he exhaled. “Let’s get back to the topic.”

Ichika stood near the edge of the room, hands folded loosely in front of her, her gaze scanning the posters on the wall and the shelves stacked with rhythm game merch.

“Hatsune Miku,” she said plainly.

Yuu nodded. “Yeah. I’ve… seen her too.”

Ichika looked at him, her expression unreadable. “I’m pretty sure you came across a Miku as well?”

He hesitated.

His voice lowered. “Yeah. A glitching one.”

Her eyes narrowed slightly. “Glitching?”

“It was…” He tried to find the words. “A Sekai that shouldn’t exist. Everything about it felt… off. Like it wasn’t made for anyone.”

Ichika stepped closer.

“Hm… Are you hearing that, Miku?”

Yuu’s eyes widened.

“What?”

The walls around them shimmered like static rippling through water.

And then—

His room was gone.

Replaced.

With a classroom.

Old desks.

Chalkboard.

Morning sunlight filtered through curtains that didn't exist a second ago.

The faint echo of distant school bells rang like ghosts.

Yuu's breath hitched.

He knew this place.

"School Sekai."

"That's right," a voice answered gently.

Yuu turned, already knowing who it belonged to.

There she stood.

Turquoise eyes glowing softly beneath long, twin pigtails that swayed like silk. Black and red square clips held her hair in place. She wore a uniform that shimmered slightly at the edges—as if the data that made her couldn't decide what version of her should be rendered.

"Hatsune Miku…" he whispered.

Her expression was gentle.

"Hello, Yuu."

"Hello, Miku."

Yuu stared at her—not just because she looked real, but because she felt real.

There was no static this time.

Present.

Processing.

Feeling.

Standing there like a memory given shape, like something sacred pulled from the screen and planted into reality.

"Now then…" Ichika turned to Miku, voice calm. "You wanted me to find him, right?"

Miku beamed, her hands clasping together with an audible clap.

"That's right! Thank you, Ichika."

"You're welcome."

Yuu's brows furrowed. "What's going on? What do you two want from me?"

Ichika looked to Miku again, silently handing her the stage.

Miku took it with a cheerful hum.

“Well, it’s a little complicated,” Ichika admitted. “But Miku can explain it better than I can.”

Miku spun lightly on her heels, her long pigtails catching the light as she stopped in front of Yuu.

“Okay, Yuu! But before we talk, how about a performance?”

“A performance?”

He barely finished the word before the room reacted.

A soft mechanical chime rang out.

A UI appeared in front of him, floating in midair, transparent, tinged with cyan.

Familiar.

Too familiar.

PROJECT SEKAI.

The menu flickered once before locking in place.

Song: needLe

Difficulty hovered over the panel.

His fingers moved on instinct, selecting the highest difficulty.

“…needLe,” he murmured, almost nostalgic. “Leo/need’s first song, right?”

Miku nodded brightly.

“It’s a memory. Not just mine—but yours too. The beginning of something you love.”

Yuu’s heart thudded once, hard.

He didn’t just remember the chart.

He remembered when he first saw the story.

It wasn’t just a song.

It was a story in motion.

And now he was going to live it.

“Alright,” he said quietly, placing his hand over the holographic ‘start’ button. “Let’s see how far this world wants to take me.”

And the moment he tapped Start—

The classroom dissolved into stage lights.

The moment his finger tapped Start, the classroom vanished—peeled away like stage curtains drawing back to reveal the world behind the illusion.

Reality tilted.

The dull hum of fluorescent lighting shattered into radiant beams of white, sweeping across a space far too large to be a school.

Desks, walls, windows—all dissolved into colored mist, melting into deep violets and soft cyan blues. The scent of chalk and wood was replaced by something colder.

Sharper.

The sterile chill of concert air and the electric thrum of unseen speakers.

Yuu blinked.

He stood beneath a spotlight.

No longer in his Kamiyama High uniform, but in something entirely different—something crafted.

A sleek performance outfit of black and white with faint lines of digital light tracing along the sleeves and hems. He looked like he'd stepped straight out of a 4-star pull animation.

Beside him stood Miku.

A microphone shimmered in her hand, eyes steady on his. Her expression wasn't demanding—just calm. Certain.

"You ready?" she asked softly.

Yuu didn't reply.

He only exhaled.

3.

2.

1.

The first notes of "needLe" struck, like a heartbeat restarting.

A fast build-up. Strings layered with emotional undertones, urgent but haunting.

And Yuu moved.

Not like a player tapping a screen, but like someone with purpose. Like someone dancing to save himself.

Notes shimmered into the air, symbols and shapes floating all around him, awaiting his motion.

His hands cut through them.

Tap.

Swipe.

Step.

Spin.

Precision flowed through muscle memory he never trained for.

Beside him, Miku began to sing.

Her voice carried the verse like silk pulled taut—beautiful and trembling with something unspoken. Yuu joined her, hesitant at first, his voice rougher, more human, raw.

"I wanted you to leave me alone, I guess you were the same."

His steps matched hers. Each lyric held a weight. Each beat rang with old ache and new resolve.

They weren't just singing.

They were remembering.

Miku spun gracefully, twin-tails sweeping like a painter's brush. Lights followed her. When her eyes met Yuu's in the middle of the chorus, he didn't see data.

He saw someone who understood.

The chorus swelled, and with it, so did something in his chest. Too much, too fast. One note faltered under his hand.

Just one.

But he caught the rhythm before it broke.

Still here.

Still singing.

Still in this Sekai.

The final chorus climbed like a crescendo of breathless belief, and Yuu didn't hold back. His voice pushed into the space. Clear. Sharp. Vulnerable.

Then—

CLEAR.

The word didn't just appear.

It rang.

A soft pulse of gold washed over the stage like sunrise. The lights dimmed. The mist thinned. The concert space faded into quiet white.

Like the world had exhaled.

Yuu stood in the silence, breath heavy, sweat clinging to his temple. Every part of him buzzed—not with exhaustion, but clarity.

Miku faced him, her hands folded gently behind her back, her smile soft.

Ichika stood a few steps behind, quiet, watchful.

Still grounded.

Still here.

Yuu laughed faintly, wiping his forehead.

“Ahh… ten miss,” he muttered. “Could’ve been better.”

And just like that, the golden lights dimmed.

The spotlight faded.

The concert stage dissolved like dust on the wind.

Yuu blinked once—and the familiar rows of desks snapped back into place around him. Fluorescent lights buzzed overhead. The chalkboard loomed silently at the front. School Sekai: Classroom. Back to normal.

Well… as normal as this place gets.

Clapping broke the hush.

Ichika stood by the teacher’s desk, a soft smile on her face, hands coming together in quiet applause.

“That was amazing,” she said, sincere. “I didn’t know you could dance and sing like that, Hazuki.”

Yuu stiffened.

“…Mhh.” He looked away, hand awkwardly rubbing the back of his neck. “Thanks.”

His ears were a little too warm.

He wasn’t used to compliments.

Especially not from characters he once watched through a phone screen.

Ichika tilted her head, studying him curiously. “You looked… comfortable up there. Like the stage belonged to you.”

Yuu gave a short, shaky laugh.

“I wouldn’t go that far.”

“But it did,” Miku chimed in from behind, stepping closer with a bright smile. “That stage responded to your feelings. Even the Sekai adjusted to you.”

Yuu glanced at her, brow furrowing. “What does that mean?”

Miku simply placed a finger to her lips. “That’s for you to figure out.”

Yuu sighed, long and tired.

“Figures…”

Ichika giggled softly. “You really are interesting, Hazuki-kun.”

“Please don’t say that,” he mumbled.

“I mean it,” she added gently. “People usually hesitate. They hold back in the Sekai. But you…”

Her voice trailed off, as if she wasn’t sure how to finish the thought.

Yuu turned to face her, and for a moment, they simply stood there—no words, no weight. Just the quiet familiarity of classmates after a shared secret.

“Well,” he said eventually, “I’m still not used to this.”

He motioned around them—to the classroom that wasn’t really a classroom, to the world that wasn’t quite reality.

Ichika smiled. “Then we’ll get used to it together.”

“Anyway,” Yuu said, clearing his throat as he leaned back against the desk, “let’s get back to the original goal. Why did you two come looking for me?”

Ichika and Miku exchanged a glance.

Not one of hesitation, but of understanding—like they'd already agreed on what came next.

“Do you remember the glitching Miku?” Ichika asked softly.

Yuu’s gaze dropped to the floor.

“Yeah… I still remember her.”

“The one who shouldn't exist,” Miku said, stepping forward, her tone turning just a little firmer. “We want to save her. From that non-existent Sekai.”

“...Save her?” Yuu echoed. “But how? That Sekai doesn’t even exist.”

“You still don’t get it, do you?” Miku tilted her head. “In order to make that Sekai real… it needs a performance.”

“A performance…?” he repeated, eyes narrowing.

She nodded.

“Songs carry emotions. Emotions give shape to Sekai. Without them, it fades. Collapses. But if you perform—if you carry those feelings forward—it can stabilize. It can form.”

Yuu looked down again.

Fingers curling slightly against the edge of the desk.

That glitching Miku… that empty stage… that void that called to him like a dream he couldn’t wake from.

“…But my goal was to go home,” he murmured.

The words came out quieter than he expected.

“I didn’t want to be a part of this. I didn’t ask to be pulled in… but now…”

He swallowed.

“I’m enjoying it. This world. Being here. With all of you. The characters I—”

He stopped himself. His voice cracked just slightly.

“I think I’m… grateful. To that ‘god’ or whatever they were. For putting me here.”

Silence.

Ichika stepped closer. Her expression was soft, calm. No judgment. No expectations.

“Then what’s wrong?” she asked. “Hazuki, what’s really bothering you?”

He let out a bitter breath.

“Is it really okay for me to be here?” His voice trembled. “I’m not part of this story. I’m not a main character. I’m just an outsider... a variable.”

He clenched his fists.

“I’m not a protagonist.”

For a moment, no one spoke.

Then Miku smiled.

Not the idol smile she gave to crowds.

A real one.

“You’re wrong, Yuu,” she said gently. “You are a protagonist.”

He blinked. “Huh?”

“You are the protagonist beyond the stage.”

His breath caught in his throat.

Those words—

The protagonist beyond the stage.

He looked up slowly, eyes wide.

“You may not have a scripted role, or a story arc like the others,” Miku continued, stepping into the spotlight that wasn’t really there. “But you chose to act. You chose to feel. You chose to step onto that stage.”

Ichika nodded beside her. “That’s what makes you more than just a background character.”

Yuu stared at them both.

And for the first time, he didn’t feel like he was watching from the outside.

He felt seen.

Real.

He laughed quietly, disbelieving.

“…You two are ridiculous.”

“Maybe,” Ichika said with a small smile. “But we’re not wrong.”

And suddenly—

Yuu didn’t feel like a mistake anymore.

Just a variable that had finally found its place.

“Well, let’s keep this a secret from everyone, alright?” Ichika said, her voice lowering to a conspiratorial hush as she looked toward Miku.

“Absolutely!” Miku chirped, pressing a finger to her lips with a playful wink.

Yuu raised an eyebrow, watching the two with a mix of amusement and disbelief. “You’re both acting like we’re in some kind of spy movie.”

“We are dealing with a hidden Sekai, aren’t we?” Ichika replied, a rare mischievous glint in her eyes.

Miku giggled beside her. “Besides, keeping things a secret makes it more exciting, don’t you think?”

Yuu sighed, a faint smile tugging at the edge of his lips. “You two are dangerous together.”

Ichika tucked a damp strand of hair behind her ear, now mostly dry from earlier. “But we’re counting on you, Hazuki.”

Those words

>we’re counting on you<

They stuck with him longer than they should have.

It wasn’t pressure.

It wasn’t weight.

It was… trust.

And somehow, that was heavier.

Miku walked to the center of the classroom—still the School Sekai—and twirled once, arms outstretched as if feeling the room breathe again.

“This place will hold,” she said with certainty. “As long as your feelings are strong enough… it’ll be here waiting.”

Yuu looked down at his own hands. The slight tremble had stopped.

“…Okay,” he finally said. “I’ll help. We’ll save her.”

Ichika nodded once, her eyes steady. “Let’s do it together.”

And for the first time in this strange, scripted world…

Yuu Hazuki didn’t feel like he was just surviving it.

He felt like he had a role to play.

And maybe, just maybe, it wasn’t such a bad thing to be the protagonist after all.

Chapter 7: Welcome to the Beat

The School Sekai faded away like a dream slipping beneath the surface—quiet, seamless, almost gentle.

And just like that, they were back.

Yuu's bedroom greeted them with its usual clutter: a half-open drawer, headphone cables coiled like snakes on the desk, posters slightly crooked from age. The space felt smaller somehow. Warmer. Like reality was reminding them where they belonged.

He moved to the window and pulled the curtain aside.

"…The rain stopped."

The street outside shimmered under faint streetlamps. Pavement still wet, puddles reflecting halos of soft golden light. A breeze danced through the quiet neighborhood, crisp and clean—like the sky had finally exhaled.

Ichika stepped beside him, fingers absently brushing the damp edges of her sleeves.

"Well… that's my cue to head home," she said softly.

"Yeah."

Yuu followed her out of the room without thinking, his footsteps in sync with hers. She reached for the doorknob

and almost bumped into someone.

"Ah—!"

Yuu's mother stood just outside, blinking in surprise. For the second time that day, she caught the two of them side by side.

"Oh? You're already done with… whatever mysterious thing you two were doing?" she asked, her voice playful.

Ichika bowed with practiced grace, her tone polite. "Yes. I was just about to leave. Thank you for having me."

"Nonsense," Yuu's mom said, waving a hand. "At least stay for a warm meal. You'll catch a cold going home in that thin uniform."

"I-I really shouldn't trouble you…"

"I insist," she said, already walking toward the kitchen.

Yuu gave Ichika a helpless look, but she only offered a small shrug, lips twitching in amusement.

A few minutes later, they sat at the low dining table, bowls of rice and miso soup steaming between them. The quiet clink of chopsticks and the rustle of steam were the only sounds at first.

Ichika ate with slow, deliberate grace, offering quiet thanks after each refill.

Yuu kept his eyes on his food, wishing the warmth from the soup would drown out his embarrassment.

“So,” his mother began casually, “Ichika-chan, what school do you go to?”

“Miyamasuzaka Girls Academy.”

“Oh? A good school! But… how did you and Yuu meet?”

Ichika paused, her chopsticks hovering mid-air.

She glanced sideways at Yuu.

He blinked, caught off guard with rice still in his mouth.

The silence held, like a note waiting to resolve.

Then Ichika smiled.

“It’s a long story,” she said softly. “But… we met through music.”

“Music, huh?” Yuu’s mom chuckled. “That’s funny. Yuu doesn’t look it, but I’ve caught him humming more than once when he thinks no one’s listening.”

“M-Mother..."

“He’s better than he lets on,” Ichika added, gently hiding her smile behind a sip of soup.

“Don’t encourage her…” Yuu muttered, ears burning.

His mother only laughed. “Music brings people together. It’s a beautiful thing. And so is friendship.”

Ichika nodded. “It really is.”

By the time the meal ended, the sky outside had darkened to a soft indigo.

Streetlights flickered to life, casting shadows that moved slowly across the walls.

Yuu grabbed his jacket without a word, slinging it over one shoulder.

“I’ll walk her back,” he said, already halfway to the door.

His mom beamed, leaning out of the kitchen. “That’s my boy! Be gentlemanly, okay? Ichika-chan’s a keeper!”

“Don’t say weird stuff like that!” Yuu nearly tripped as he jammed his feet into his shoes.

Ichika waited patiently at the entrance, her umbrella open and ready. She smiled faintly, scarf pulled up to her chin.

They stepped outside.

The world had changed again, this time quietly.

The air was clean, scented with rain and asphalt.

Puddles sparkled like little stars on the sidewalk. The city had gone to sleep, leaving behind a dreamlike calm.

For a while, they walked in silence.

No tension.

Just the gentle rhythm of footsteps and distant traffic.

Then, softly:

“I’m glad I visited.”

Yuu glanced at her. “Yeah?”

Ichika nodded. “You’re not as closed off as you pretend to be.”

He let out a quiet scoff, turning his face away. “I don’t pretend.”

“You do,” she said, not accusing but stating.

“But it’s okay.”

They kept walking.

Past shuttered shops and glowing convenience stores. Past vending machines humming in their corners. The kind of walk that didn’t need a destination.

“I’ll be fine around here.”

Ichika’s voice was soft, calm, but certain. The wind tugged gently at her scarf, shifting it like a slow-moving ribbon beneath the pale amber glow of the streetlamp.

They had stopped at the edge of an intersection.

One road led deeper into the quiet maze of houses and apartments, while the other curved gently back toward the train station, disappearing behind rows of trees slick with rain.

Yuu slowed his steps, standing a pace behind her.

“Are you sure?” he asked.

She nodded. “I’ve walked this way a lot. It’s not far.”

Water still glistened across the pavement, catching reflections like scattered pieces of a broken sky. A lone drop slipped from the edge of her umbrella, tapping the ground between them.

The sound was small, but it echoed like a clock striking the hour.

Ichika turned to face him.

Her eyes met his—steady, unreadable for a beat. Then they softened.

“Thanks for walking with me, Hazuki.”

He rubbed the back of his neck, eyes trailing off for a moment. “Well… yeah. It’s not like I’d just let you go after dinner and a—uh, you know—casual dimensional shift.”

That earned a small laugh from her.

Brief.

Genuine.

She stepped back, the swing of her schoolbag subtle at her side.

“I’ll contact you again,” she said. “We still have work to do.”

“Right… the glitching Miku.”

“And the Sekai.”

She offered him a gentle wave. “Goodnight

“…Yeah. Goodnight.”

Yuu stood there for a moment after she left.

Watching her figure grow smaller under the distant lights.

Her silhouette finally vanished around the bend, swallowed by shadows and silence.

He exhaled quietly.

“Right… I’ve got other things to do.”

Turning on his heel, he made his way back home.

The streets hummed in their usual rhythm, quiet vending machines, soft traffic in the distance, a faint glow from shop windows preparing to close.

By the time he got home, the quiet had settled again, comforting in its regularity.

He slipped through the front door, exchanged brief words with his mom, and returned to the solitude of his room.

Almost.

The hologram interface shimmered into view.

The lights dimmed to his usual setting.

Familiar.

He sat on his chair and waved a hand toward the holographic interface. With a soft chime, the Project Sekai display flickered to life.

The notification blinked in the corner of his vision:

[New Feature Unlocked: Sekai Access]

A button shimmered faintly.

You have unlocked the School Sekai.

“Huh…”

He leaned closer, eyes scanning the menu.

Only one Sekai was available.

The others—Street, Wonderland, Empty, and Stage Sekai—remained grayed out.

“Figures… I haven’t even stumbled into the rest yet.”

He sighed, resting his cheek against one hand as the interface danced with familiar music and soft colors.

Still, something inside stirred.

"Ahh… right, I have to go with Vivid BAD SQUAD tomorrow."

Yuu leaned back into his chair, letting the familiar digital interface fade into nothing as the hologram dimmed with a soft hum.

The glow from his monitor flickered out.

He stood up, stretched lazily, and crossed the room to flick off the lights.

Darkness settled in, calm and quiet.

Yuu slipped under his sheets, pulling them up to his chin. He stared at the ceiling for a long moment, eyes adjusting to the dark.

“You are the protagonist beyond the stage.”

Miku’s words echoed softly in his mind, like a lyric that wouldn’t let go.

He let out a sigh.

“…Protagonist, huh?”

“I really hope this doesn’t get out of hand…”

With that last thought, his eyes drifted shut.

Sleep took him in seconds.

[SATURDAY]

By the time Yuu’s alarm buzzed softly and insistently from his desk, the sky was already bright.

Morning sunlight filtered through the blinds in narrow, golden beams, striping across the wooden floor like a gentle spotlight.

Yuu lay still, face half-buried in his pillow.

“…It’s Saturday,” he mumbled, voice rough with sleep.

He sat up slowly, hair a tangled mess, eyes only half open.

His limbs moved on instinct, stretching with quiet groans as he peeled himself out of bed.

Today was the day.

Vivid BAD SQUAD.

Another sigh escaped his lips as he began moving through his morning routine—washing up, brushing his teeth, checking his phone for unread messages.

His hand hovered over his contacts.

Should I text Aoyagi?

He hesitated.

Eventually, he pocketed the phone and padded softly into the kitchen.

“Good morning,” he muttered, voice still low from sleep.

His mother, already preparing breakfast, turned with a smile. “Oh? You’re up early. Something special today?”

Yuu blinked, then gave a half-hearted shrug. “…Sort of.”

She arched a brow but didn’t press. “Well, eat up. I made tamagoyaki.”

“Thanks…”

It wasn’t much longer before he returned to his room, the last remnants of sleep finally gone from his eyes.

He opened the wardrobe with a small breath, fingers brushing over the hangers.

“What should I even wear to something like this...?”

Eventually, he settled on a simple outfit: a beige linen shirt, worn open over a crisp fitted tank. Paired with slim black chinos, it struck a balance between casual and put-together.

He studied himself in the mirror.

"…Is this fine?"

It looked fine.

Normal.

Maybe even cool?

He turned a little to the side, tugged the shirt hem, then stepped back.

"I'm not weird… am I?"

The mirror, of course, offered no answer.

Yuu grabbed his wallet and phone from the desk, slipping both into his pocket with a quiet sense of finality.

A quick glance in the mirror confirmed he looked presentable—ordinary enough to blend in, but neat enough to not feel out of place.

At the door, he stepped into his rubber-soled shoes, tugging at the laces to make sure they were snug.

"I'm heading out," he called over his shoulder.

"Take care!" came his mother's cheerful voice from the kitchen.

With a soft click, the door closed behind him.

The sunlight had climbed higher now, spreading golden warmth across the streets.

The air, once heavy with rain, was crisp and clean, carrying the gentle scent of damp pavement and distant blossoms.

Weekend Garage.

That was where he was headed.

If I remember right… Shiraishi Ken.

An's father.

A former musician whose name once echoed through the underground with the raw force of RAD WEEKEND—the legendary street music event that shook an entire scene awake.

RADder had sparked something back then.

It was that same spark he passed on to Akito and An.

And now… I'm walking toward that same fire.

Yuu blinked at his reflection in a passing shop window.

A small smile had crept onto his lips without him realizing it.

"…Guess I'm kinda excited," he murmured.

He quickened his pace.

A few more turns.

Just a few more steps.

And soon—

The entrance to WEEKEND GARAGE would come into view.

The door to WEEKEND GARAGE creaked open with a soft chime, and Yuu stepped inside.

The scent hit him first—coffee, aged wood, and the faint trace of dust from old amplifiers. The place had a lived-in feel. Like music had soaked into the walls over the years and refused to leave.

Behind the counter, a man was wiping down a row of glasses with casual precision. He looked up at the sound of the door.

"A new face?" the man said with a low, easy voice. "Welcome."

"Hello," Yuu replied, offering a slight nod as he stepped in further.

That's him.
An's father—Shiraishi Ken.

Up close, he looked like someone pulled straight out of an old band poster.

Late 30s, maybe early 40s. Broad shoulders beneath a loose-fitting work shirt, sleeves rolled up.

His dark brown hair was medium-length and just messy enough to seem effortless, swept back, wavy, with that artfully unkempt "I don't care" rocker charm.

There was something grounded in his presence.

Not loud, not flashy, just real. Like someone who had seen the stage lights… and the silence that comes after.

Yuu's footsteps echoed lightly across the wooden floor as he approached the counter. He slipped onto a tall stool and glanced around the quiet café.

"Shiraishi isn't here yet, huh…" he murmured under his breath.

Ken didn't comment. Just kept drying the glass in his hand, a faint smirk playing at the corner of his lips, as if he'd heard, but didn't mind the silence that followed.

Ken set the glass down with a soft clink, then leaned forward on his elbows, his posture relaxed but his gaze sharp.

“So?” he asked, voice low and even. “What do you want?”

Yuu blinked, caught off guard by the sudden directness. He shifted on the stool, his fingers curling slightly around the seat’s edge.

“I… I’m here to meet with Aoyagi. And maybe the others,” he said carefully.

Ken raised a brow. “Vivid BAD SQUAD?”

“Y-Yeah.”

The older man leaned back, folding his arms loosely across his chest. His tone didn’t change, but there was a flicker of something in his eyes now—curiosity, maybe. Or caution.

“You a fan?”

Yuu hesitated. “Uh… more like… a classmate.”

Ken’s eyes narrowed slightly, studying him. “You don’t look like one of their usual crew. Quiet. Polite. Nervous.”

He tilted his head. “Most people who walk through that door already know they belong.”

Yuu glanced down, his hands tightening where they rested on his lap.

“…I don’t know if I belong,” he admitted. “But I want to see what they’re about.”

For a moment, silence hung between them, broken only by the low hum of jazz from the speakers overhead.

Ken let out a thoughtful hum. “Fair enough.”

He leaned off the counter with a small shrug.

“If you’re waiting for them, you can hang out here as long as you want.”

Yuu started to relax—until Ken added, with a deadpan look:

“But when I asked ‘What do you want?’ I was asking for your order.”

Yuu froze.

“Oh,” he said, voice small. “Right. Sorry.”

A slow grin tugged at the corner of Ken’s mouth as he reached for a notepad.

“It’s a café, not a confession booth."

“I’ll… just have an iced coffee.”

“You got it.”

As Ken moved to prepare the drink, Yuu exhaled and sank a little lower into his stool, covering his face briefly with one hand.

Great start, Hazuki.

Real smooth.

The bell above the entrance chimed with a soft jingle, bright and cheerful.

Yuu turned his head instinctively, too slow to pretend he hadn't noticed.

Three familiar figures stepped inside, framed for a fleeting moment by the golden light from outside.

At the front was An. She spotted him first, her brows lifting slightly in surprise. "Huh? Hazuki…? You're early. I didn't know you'd already been here. I was going to ask Toya to message you."

Yuu froze mid-sip, the straw of his iced coffee hovering near his lips. He held it there for a second longer than necessary.

Crap.

His mind scrambled for an answer, anything that didn't sound like a cheap line of dialogue.

"I, uh… kinda wandered in," he said, letting out an awkward laugh as he scratched the back of his neck. "Thought I'd check it out."

"Wandered here?" Akito repeated, amused. He raised an eyebrow as he approached. "You make it sound like you tripped into a jazz lounge by accident."

Yuu shrugged, feigning nonchalance. "Heard of the place. Just never got around to visiting."

Beside him, Kohane smiled, tilting her head gently. "That's a pretty incredible coincidence."

Yuu gave a small nod, though the word coincidence still rang hollow in his ears.

Akito slid onto the stool beside him without hesitation, resting both arms casually on the counter. "Toya said he'd be a bit late," he commented, glancing toward the door. "We can chill for a bit."

An took a seat beside Kohane, her gaze briefly lingering on Yuu before she turned to the man behind the counter. "Papa, iced tea, please."

Ken, already halfway through pouring another glass, gave a slight nod. "Coming right up."

The café returned to its usual rhythm: the soft hum of lo-fi jazz, gentle clinks of glass and cutlery, the warmth of afternoon sunlight sliding through the wide windows.

"Should we tell Toya that Hazuki's already here?" Kohane asked softly, looking between the others.

"I'll text him," An replied, already pulling out her phone.

A few quiet minutes passed, and then—

The bell jingled again, softer this time. Subtle, but enough to draw their eyes toward the entrance.

Yuu didn’t even have to look.

He already knew.

Toya Aoyagi stepped inside with his usual calm presence, pushing back a strand of hair from his face. His gaze scanned the café's booths, counter, and customers until it settled on Yuu.

Without hesitation, he walked over and took the empty stool beside Akito.

“You’re early,” Toya said, setting his bag down neatly as he sat.

“Yeah.”

“You could’ve let us know,” Toya continued, adjusting the strap of his bag. “I said I’d be late. You didn’t say you were coming at all.”

Yuu gave a helpless shrug. “Didn’t think it mattered.”

Akito leaned back, smirking. “You two sound like bandmates already.”

Toya turned to him briefly, then looked at Yuu. “We’re not. Yet.”

Yuu blinked. “Wait—yet?”

Toya didn’t elaborate.

He simply turned to Ken behind the counter. “Coffee. Black.”

Ken gave a nod and reached for the carafe.

Kohane stifled a laugh behind her drink. “I think Hazuki-kun fits in just fine.”

Yuu sighed, finally taking a proper sip of his now half-warm coffee.

The sunlight spilled across the counter like honey, casting soft reflections in the glasses.

“By the way,” Kohane began, looking toward Toya, “do we practice here? Or at the usual place?”

“We’ll head there,” An said, lowering her drink. “I want to introduce Hazuki to someone before we start.”

“Sounds like a plan,” Toya added, sipping his black coffee with quiet approval.

Yuu glanced between them, voice quieter than before but edged with intent.

“Do you guys… want me in Vivid BAD SQUAD?”

The question lingered in the air, hanging just above the soft hum of conversation and the clinking of glassware behind the counter.

An tilted her head slightly, thoughtful. “Hmm. I don’t think we’re really looking to add new members right now…” She paused, then smiled. “But it wouldn’t hurt to ask Miku.”

Akito leaned forward, resting his chin on one hand. “Besides, adding a member isn’t exactly a problem,” he said casually. The usual laid-back smirk played at his lips—Mr. Nice Guy, still wearing the mask like a second skin.

Yuu didn’t reply immediately. Instead, he looked at Akito.

For just a moment, their eyes met.

And in that moment, Yuu saw it—buried beneath the grin, behind the smooth tone and effortless charm.

Caution.

Distance.

Akito still wasn’t comfortable around him.

That’s alright.

Yuu looked away with a small shrug, his voice calm.

“I was just curious.”

“Anyway,” An said, setting her empty glass down with a gentle clink, “shall we head there once we’re done with our drinks?”

The others nodded, a quiet murmur of agreement shared between them. For a brief moment, the café held its breath—warm afternoon light filtering through the tall windows, soft lo-fi beats humming in the background, the rich aroma of roasted coffee lingering in the air like a memory.

Then, one by one, they stood.

Chairs slid back. The scrape of soles brushed softly against the wooden floor.

An’s smile lingered, confident and easy. “Let’s go,” she said, turning toward the door.

Yuu followed, rising with the group.

And just like that—

Each member of Vivid BAD SQUAD reached into their pockets and tapped their phones in perfect sync.

Yuu hesitated—but then his own phone buzzed with a faint pulse of light. A holographic interface flickered into view before him.

[Teleporting...]

The text shimmered against the air.

Before he could fully register what was happening, the world began to dissolve.

Not violently.

Gracefully—like curtains of light pulling away from a stage.

The café blurred into mist.

The counters and walls folded in on themselves like pages turning.

Then the lighting changed—sharper, alive with color.

Sound came next: the distant thrum of bass, layered with a low ripple of electronic rhythm, pulsing from the ground like a second heartbeat.

A chime echoed gently in Yuu's ear:

[You have unlocked the Street Sekai.]

He drew in a quiet breath.

Neon graffiti crawled up the walls, words scrawled in fury and freedom. Colors clashed like cymbals. Murals of singers and dancers stretched across the concrete like they were mid-motion, immortalized in rebellion.

Posters hung crooked on the walls, layered over each other like sediment, advertisements for underground live shows, freestyle rap battles, beat cyphers, and pop-up performances in places where the rules didn't matter.

The air wasn't just thick with atmosphere—it vibrated.

It buzzed with something alive.

Yuu turned, slowly.

And standing in the middle of it all, An turned back to him.

Her hands were behind her back, eyes gleaming with pride and excitement.

"Hazuki," she said, voice warm and certain, "welcome to our Sekai… the Street Sekai."

Yuu stared at her for a moment, the corners of his mouth twitching upward in disbelief.

He exhaled slowly.

A laugh, half-shocked, half-amazed, slipped out of him.

He didn't say anything else.

He didn't need to.

The Sekai said it for him.

Chapter 8: Deuce and Flames!

"Yo! You spacing out already?" Akito's voice cut through the electric hum of the city. He waved a hand in front of Yuu's face, smirking.

Yuu blinked, pulled from his daze. "Sorry. Just… taking it in."

An laughed, arms confidently crossed as she walked ahead. "You'll get used to it. Street Sekai doesn't wait for you to catch up."

The thumping rhythm of distant speakers echoed through the narrow alley, bouncing off walls decorated with graffiti that looked almost alive

Every turn felt like it could be the start of a live show.

The very air carried energy, restless, vibrant, untamed.

"Where are we headed first?" Yuu asked, still glancing around, eyes wide at the colors and sounds crashing together in beautiful disorder.

"To meet someone," Toya said, falling into step beside him. "Someone important to this place."

The four of them made their way down a winding side street until the familiar neon signage came into view.

Crase Café.

This is it, he thought. The place where An and Kohane reunited. The heart of Vivid BAD SQUAD.

As the door opened with a chime, warm light spilled onto the sidewalk, and a familiar figure looked up from behind the counter.

"Ah! Hello, everyone!" came a cheerful voice.

"MEIKO!" An called, her face lighting up as she dashed forward.

Without hesitation, she flung her arms around the older woman.

MEIKO laughed warmly, catching her in a hug. "It's good to see you, too, An. You always bring the noise with you."

Yuu stood at the entrance, watching the scene unfold with a strange feeling blooming in his chest, like stepping into a memory that wasn't his but still meant something.

MEIKO's eyes shifted to him as the others followed in.

"And you must be Hazuki-kun," she said kindly.

Yuu blinked, startled. "Y-Yeah."

"I've heard a bit about you," MEIKO said, her smile deepening. "Welcome to Street Sekai."

Something about the way she said it made Yuu feel… seen.

Not just present, but welcome.

An clapped a hand on his back. “You’ll get to know MEIKO well. She’s been watching over this Sekai longer than any of us.”

“And you’ll be needing her help if you want to understand it,” Toya added, settling into a nearby booth.

Yuu followed them inside as MEIKO prepared drinks with practiced ease, her presence calm but unmistakably strong.

“Are you guys here for practice?” MEIKO asked, wiping her hands on a clean towel behind the counter.

“Yeah!” Kohane beamed, her smile bright and unwavering. “We invited Hazuki-kun too.”

Yuu gave a small nod, unsure of what to say with MEIKO’s attention now focused on him.

Her gaze was sharp but kind, like someone who’d seen hundreds of hopefuls walk through the door, yet still believed in each one. And yet, there was something more behind her eyes. Something knowing.

“Miku told me a lot about you,” MEIKO said, folding her arms with a casual air.

Yuu blinked. “Miku… did?”

“She said you’re an unusual case,” she murmured, leaning forward just slightly. “One who wasn’t meant to be here—but stayed anyway. And despite that, you’ve started moving hearts.”

The words hit deeper than he expected. He wasn’t sure how to respond. His mouth opened, then closed again.

Is that really how she sees me…?

“I don’t know about moving hearts,” he said at last, voice low. “I’m just… trying to figure things out.”

MEIKO smiled.

“That’s exactly how it starts.”

Before he could say anything more, An leaned over the counter with a playful pout. “Ahh! What are you two whispering about?”

“Nothing~” MEIKO replied with a singsong tone, stepping back with a wink.

Then, more quietly—just for him—she added, “She also said you’ll help save the non-existent Miku. That’s no small thing, Hazuki-kun.”

Yuu felt a quiet weight settle in his chest.

Not pressure.

Not fear.

But gravity.

It wasn’t praise.

It was recognition.

And somehow, that made it scarier.

MEIKO straightened. “Anyway, if you're here to practice, the studio’s open. Don’t hold back.”

An grinned. “We weren’t planning to.”

Akito cracked his knuckles, lips curling into a half-smile. “Time to see if Hazuki can keep up.”

Toya, ever composed, simply glanced Yuu’s way. “Let’s find out.”

Kohane offered a soft smile.

Yuu gave a breathy laugh, somewhere between nervous and grateful. “Thanks… I think.”

The studio door opened with a soft hiss, revealing a corridor lined with dim LED strips and the faint sound of beats echoing from within.

As they stepped inside, a holographic panel shimmered to life in front of Yuu.

[Stage Entry: Street Sekai - Practice Room]

Song: Traffic Jam
Select Difficulty: [Easy] [Normal] [Hard] [Expert] [Master]

Yuu’s breath caught. His fingers hovered mid-air.

The music had already begun to build—fast percussion, sharp bass lines, a relentless rhythm that didn’t stop for beginners.

The others were already moving to their places, chatting lightly, stretching.

He raised his voice just enough to be heard.

“…I know this is unusual, but—can I join?”

An turned, surprised. “You serious?”

Yuu nodded. “I want to try.”

Akito raised an eyebrow. “You’ve never trained with us.”

“I know.” His voice was calm now, steady. “But I’ve danced before. I can handle it.”

There was a brief pause.

A shift in the air.

Toya didn't answer, just studied him, his eyes unreadable. But something in his posture relaxed.

Kohane smiled, tilting her head. "If you're sure… We'll adjust."

"No need."

Yuu tapped the screen.

[Selected: Master]

A low whistle escaped Akito. "Alright then, Mr. Classmate."

An grinned widely. "Let's see if you can match our flow."

MEIKO's voice chimed in from the booth overhead, arms crossed as she watched. "If he breaks something, I've got towels. But I doubt he'll mess up."

Yuu glanced at her, then back at the others.

She knows. MEIKO… knows about me, too.

The lights shifted overhead.

The Sekai responded.

The studio transformed—walls sliding out, lights adjusting, neon borders pulsing to the rhythm. The floor beneath them flickered with color, echoing the tempo. This wasn't just rehearsal space.

This was a performance arena.

Each member took their place—An stretching beside Kohane, Akito cracking his neck, Toya calmly watching the countdown display.

Yuu found his position.

The projection flared in front of him.

3...
2...
1…

The beat dropped.

Fast.

Sharp.

Alive.

The first note came like a strike of lightning.

Yuu moved.

Step.

Slide.

Tap.

Flick.

His body responded before his thoughts could catch up, rhythm pouring through his limbs like second nature.

The others fell into motion beside him.

Akito’s footwork was razor clean.

Kohane’s hands glided with practiced grace.

An danced like she was throwing fire.

Toya’s movements were quiet, exact, like a thread holding the entire stage together.

And Yuu—

—matched them.

Maybe he didn’t belong here.

Maybe he was just an outsider.

But he was here. Right now. With them.

Feet pounding. Notes flashing. Voices rising.

Together.

In this Sekai.

In this moment.

He was dancing.

“Deuce, Deuce, Deuce!
'Til you die, 'til I die,
We won't call off the fight due to injury!”

Their voices rang out like lightning in unison, syncopated perfectly with the thunderous rhythm vibrating through the studio floor.

Each syllable hit with force.

Each motion, sharp and alive.

The choreography surged forward, no space to breathe between footwork that demanded everything: quick pivots, sharp angles, flawless transitions, coordinated flares.

The kind of routine that didn’t forgive hesitation.

And yet—

Yuu kept up.

No.

He matched them.

Beat for beat.

Move for move.

Like he belonged there all along.

He wasn’t watching the others anymore.

He wasn’t mimicking.

He wasn’t thinking.

He was feeling.

Every glowing step marker, every beat in the bassline, every subtle cue in the air—he followed them instinctively, as though the stage had opened a path just for him.

It was as if the rhythm lived in his chest, guiding his limbs like a current flowing straight from the music itself.

And then—

The final chorus hit.

A surge of movement.

A snap of rapid-fire lyrics.

A wild crescendo of motion.

Each of them spun into their finishing steps.

An’s hair flicked upward in a perfect arc.

Toya’s stance struck clean and firm.

Kohane’s hands spread like wings in perfect timing.

Akito's heel slid across the neon-lit floor in a full-body sweep.

And Yuu—

Yuu landed with them.

Pose struck. Heart racing. Hands clenched at his side, chest heaving—but his balance never wavered.

For a second, the only sound was their breathing.

Then—

Clap. Clap. Clap.

MEIKO's voice rang warmly over the speaker system above.
"That was fantastic!"

She sounded genuinely impressed.

But down on the practice floor, no one moved.

There was a long pause.

Akito turned his head slowly.
Stared.
Then blinked.

"…What the hell was that?!"

Before Yuu could even speak, Akito rushed over and grabbed him by the shoulders, shaking him gently but urgently—as if trying to verify that he was, in fact, human.

"Are you—are you an actual genius?!"

"W-Wait, Shinonome, you're too close!" Yuu stammered, his arms awkwardly frozen midair, overwhelmed by the sudden attention.

"You just mirrored our whole routine! First try! First try!" Akito exclaimed, his voice half-accusation, half-awe.

"I-I don't know, I just… moved with it," Yuu replied, flustered.

Toya, still composed, let out a low breath and crossed his arms.

"Honestly," he said, "that was impressive."

Kohane nodded rapidly, her face lit with wonder. "You even did the arm flare during the second chorus. We never taught you that."

Yuu blinked. "The what?"

An walked up last, one brow arched and hands on her hips, but a grin played at her lips. "I don't know where you picked that up from… but that was legit."

Yuu let out a laugh, half nervous, half disbelieving.

"I just… didn't want to fall behind."

Akito finally let go of him, stepping back with an exaggerated sigh.

“Well, too late. You might’ve lapped us.”

The group shared a laugh, the tension melting into warm, easy energy.

MEIKO’s voice chimed in again from above, this time teasing, “So, should I start preparing a fifth spotlight?”

Just as the laughter began to settle and the glow of the studio dimmed into its idle rhythm, the door creaked open with a soft whine.

A pair of light, hurried footsteps echoed across the floor.

“Sorry! Am I late?!”

The voice was bright, breathless, cheerful, and full of life.

All heads turned.

Yuu blinked.

Standing at the entrance was a girl with twin buns and high pigtails that flowed like waves down her back. Her hair was unmistakably teal, but lighter—sun-washed and wild.

She wore a black hoodie with hot pink streaks and a bold blue inner lining, casually layered over a cropped top. Her shorts were paired with mismatched leggings—one solid black, the other patterned like shattered glass—and her sneakers pulsed with faint electric-blue lights that matched the urban spark in her presence.

Hatsune Miku.

But this wasn’t the Miku from the School Sekai.

This one moved differently.
She radiated rhythm.

Streetlight energy.
Graffiti soul.
Vivid BAD SQUAD’s Miku.

An crossed her arms, smirking. “Took you long enough.”

“I had to finish something in the Stage Sekai,” Miku replied with a playful puff of her cheeks. She stepped fully into the studio, her stride loose and bouncy, like the beat of a silent track followed her wherever she walked.

Kohane lit up instantly. “Miku! I’m so glad you came.”

Miku’s grin widened. “I wouldn’t miss a session with you guys.”

Then her eyes fell on Yuu.

And something in her expression softened, just a little.

“So… you’re the one.”

Yuu stiffened. “Me?”

She nodded, tilting her head with interest.

“I’ve heard about you. From… her.”

Her voice dipped slightly, warmer now. A hint of something shared.

Yuu’s chest tightened at the memory—the classroom bathed in sunset light, the stage blooming into color, the other Miku’s voice in harmony with his own.

“Right,” he said quietly.

“I caught the end of your performance,” she added, stepping closer. “You danced like it mattered to you. Like the rhythm was yours.”

Yuu hesitated, then gave a small nod.

“I think… it was.”

Miku’s smile deepened, her eyes gleaming.

“That’s all that matters in this Sekai.”

She turned toward the others. “So? What do you think?”

An tapped her chin, pretending to deliberate. “He’s a little rough around the edges.”

Akito leaned to one side, arms folded with a crooked grin. “But freakishly talented.”

Kohane giggled softly. “And kind.”

Toya didn’t miss a beat. “He keeps up.”

Miku looked back at Yuu and extended a hand, steady, confident, welcoming.

Her teal-painted nails glinted under the studio lights.

“Then welcome to our rhythm, Hazuki Yuu.”

He stared at her hand for a second.

Then looked at the group, at the easy confidence in An’s eyes, the spark in Akito’s grin, the quiet encouragement in Kohane’s smile, and the cool steadiness of Toya’s gaze.

A slow breath escaped his chest.

And he reached out.

Their hands met—palm to palm, a quiet pact between beats.

“…Wait, so I’m in?”

Miku tilted her head again. “Well… only if you want to be.”

Yuu was quiet for a beat.

Then he nodded, a faint, crooked smile on his lips. “I don’t like being in the center. Just… let me dance in the back.”

Miku laughed.

“So long as you keep dancing,” she said, “you’re already part of the team.”

And just like that…

I became a member of Vivid BAD SQUAD.

After the practice session, we found ourselves back at Crase Café—surrounded by warm light and the mellow hum of machines, the scent of roasted beans drifting in lazy spirals.

We laughed, teased, leaned back into the kind of comfort only music and sweat could earn.

It came from all of them.

From An, who was still bouncing on the balls of her feet, her voice loud and honest, slinging playful jabs between sips of lemon soda.

From Kohane, who cradled her mug with both hands like it held her thoughts together—nodding, listening, always sincere.

From Toya, who didn’t speak much, but whose presence was grounding. Every rare smile or quiet glance felt deliberate, earned.

And from Akito… who still wore that well-rehearsed smile.

His “Mr. Nice Guy” persona never faltered.

But I saw it.

The way his compliments came was too fast, too polished.

The brief moments when his expression flickered—his eyes just a beat too slow to follow his words.

I’ve seen the real Akito.

The one in the game.

The one with sharp fire in his eyes and something fragile beneath it.

And I wished, quietly, selfishly, that he’d show even a flicker of that to me.

But how could I ask for that?

I wasn’t his rival.

Not his closest friend.

Just a stranger suddenly sharing a stage.

Still, the thought lingered like a note not quite resolved.

Eventually, the Sekai faded.

Colors dulled.
Graffiti melted into stillness.
The rhythm dispersed.

And just like that—

We were back.

WEEKEND GARAGE greeted us again, dim and familiar, all wooden edges and soft jazz playing low in the background. The smell of coffee clung to the air like an old memory.

Toya and Kohane had already said their goodbyes.

Only An, Akito, and I remained, sprawled across the café stools, drained but content.

Then Akito stood, brushing his palms together.

“I’m heading out,” he said casually.

“Me too,” I added, sliding off my seat.

An waved us off. “Alright, take care! Text me when you get home!”

And just like that, it was just Akito and me.

Walking.

Side by side.

No music.

No stage.

Just the sound of our footsteps echoing gently against the pavement, while the sun dipped behind the buildings, painting the street in golden orange.

I wanted to say something, anything.

But the words wouldn’t come.

My thoughts stumbled over themselves.

Then, Akito stopped.

I blinked.

His body stiffened, tense, frozen like a caught wire.

“Wait! Wait up!”

A breathless voice echoed behind us.

I turned, just in time to see a puppy bolting toward us, its leash trailing behind like a ribbon in the wind.

“Arf! Arf!”

Its ears flopped with each bounce as it made a beeline toward us.

Instinct took over.

I stepped forward and caught it mid-run, cradling the small, wriggling thing in my arms. It kicked twice, then stilled—panting softly.

“Thank you!” the owner said, jogging up with red cheeks and a relieved smile.

“No worries,” I replied, handing the puppy over with a small nod.

They walked away moments later, the leash now held tight, the puppy looking over its shoulder once with a soft yip before disappearing around the corner.

“That was close, huh, Shinonome—?”

I paused.

Akito hadn’t moved.

He stood there, pale.

Still as stone.

His fingers were clenched into fists at his sides. His eyes were wide, not in surprise, but in fear.

Right…

I’d forgotten.

Akito’s afraid of dogs.

All dogs.

No matter the size.

It wasn’t just fear, it was trauma.

Something about the bark, the rush, the snapping leash had frozen him.

“A…Akito,” I said gently, taking a cautious step closer.

His shoulders jerked, like he’d only just realized he was still standing in the middle of the street.

He exhaled sharply, forcing a hand through his hair. “Tch… damn it.”

“…Sorry,” I murmured. “I didn’t think.”

He shook his head. “It’s fine. Just—caught me off guard.”

His voice was quieter than usual. Shaky at the edges.

We stood there for a moment longer, silence folding around us like a blanket no one knew how to lift.

Then, he sighed.

“You… won’t tell the others, right?”

His voice was low. Almost pleading. Not the kind of tone you’d expect from someone like Shinonome Akito.

I offered a smirk anyway, tipping my head slightly. “Of course not.”

Akito’s eyes narrowed. His jaw twitched.

“Tsk… damn it…”

I watched him for a second. Really watched him.

The way he clenched his fists at his sides. The way his shoulders still hadn’t fully relaxed. The way he wouldn’t meet my eyes.

He looked… raw.

Not like the Akito I’d seen grinning behind polite words and forced banter.

This was someone else.

“Man…” I said, letting the smirk stay on my lips. “So, Shinonome’s scared of dogs, huh?”

That did it.

He turned to me, full-on glare now.

His usual smooth voice was gone—replaced by something rougher. Unfiltered.

“Oi. Don’t push it.”

There it was.

The real Akito.

The edge in his tone.

The way he stood—tense, no longer hiding behind casual lines or easy smiles.

I raised both hands in mock surrender, still grinning. “Okay, okay. Just saying. You didn’t flinch—you froze. Like a statue.”

Akito growled under his breath. “I said don’t push it.”

The mask was fully off now.

He clicked his tongue, jamming his hands into his pockets as he looked away.

“Seriously annoying…” he muttered. “First I get chased by a mutt, and now I’m getting teased by you…”

I chuckled, but there was something a little warmer beneath it now. Less teasing. More… familiar.

He was showing me a side no one else had seen.

A side I’d only read about in fragmented character bios and seen glimpses of in the game.

Akito glanced sideways at me, noticing I wasn’t saying anything.

“What?” he snapped.

“Nothing,” I said simply. “Just glad I got to see the real you.”

His scowl deepened, but he didn’t argue.

Didn’t deny it.

“…Tch.”

He looked forward again and started walking.

And this time, I followed, not as a classmate.

Not as a player in someone else’s story.

But as someone who was finally, slowly being let into his.

Soon, we parted ways.

Akito shoved his hands deeper into his pockets, muttering something under his breath as he turned down the opposite street. I watched his back for a moment, the fading sunlight casting long shadows behind him.

No wave.

No smile.

Just the rhythm of his footsteps slowly fading into the quiet.

I exhaled.

The sky above had turned a soft amber, dusk bleeding into evening. City lights flickered on one by one, and the cool breeze carried the scent of distant food stalls and rain-dampened asphalt.

I turned the other way, heading home.

Chapter 9: Untitled Childhood Friends

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

[SUNDAY]

The sunlight that spilled into Yuu's room that morning felt… different.

It wasn't the golden kind that warmed the skin and begged for a few more lazy minutes under the covers. No, this light was quieter. Gentle. Like it had crept in on tiptoe, afraid to wake the silence that had settled in the room.

Yuu sat on the edge of his bed, elbows on his knees, phone in one hand. The screen glowed faintly —an empty inbox waiting to be filled.

No messages from An.

Nothing from Kohane or Toya.

And Akito? Yeah… definitely not after yesterday's teasing.

But he didn't mind.

Today wasn't about them.

Just stillness.

His gaze wandered to the window, where a soft breeze stirred the curtains.

Outside, a group of kids zipped past on bicycles, their laughter trailing behind like a ribbon unraveling in the wind.

A familiar tug pulled at his chest, faint, but unmistakable.

A memory.

A name.

Someone he hadn't thought of in a while.

He exhaled slowly and reached into the air, fingers swiping instinctively as if peeling back reality itself.

With a flick, the holographic UI of Project Sekai blinked into view.

He scrolled past the familiar tabs, eyes lingering for a second on the icons of each world. Then, without much thought, he tapped the glowing panel marked:

[School Sekai]

A soft chime answered his decision.

And just like that, the world began to shift again.

Yuu opened his eyes to a familiar ceiling bathed in morning light—but it wasn't his bedroom.

The School Sekai.

The air was calm, brushed with the scent of chalk and spring. Warm sun streamed in through the tall classroom windows, casting a gentle glow across the polished floors.

A voice called out, soft and bright.

"Oh? Hazuki, you're up early."

He turned.

Miku stood by the window, sunlight catching on the edge of her blue ribbon.

Beside her, Ichika gave a small wave.

"Miku. Ichika," Yuu greeted, his voice still touched by sleep. "Good morning."

Before he could take a step, another voice chimed in—lighter, curious.

"Oh? Who's this?"

Yuu turned toward the voice.

She was elegant and poised.

Her long pink hair fell freely down her back, with a single, iconic strand curling near her shoulder. Her blue eyes sparkled with a quiet calm.

Miku stepped forward with a small smile. "This is Yuu Hazuki, a friend."

The pink-haired girl offered a graceful nod. "Hello! I'm Megurine Luka."

Yuu blinked, quickly straightening. "Hello."

His gaze moved instinctively—taking in her appearance.

Like the others, Luka wore the School Sekai's signature uniform: a black godet skirt, crisp white button-up shirt, and a tailored blazer trimmed with white. But somehow, on her, it carried a more refined air—like she belonged on a stage, not just in a classroom.

Huh… I didn't meet her last time.

"So?" Ichika asked, gently tugging him back from his thoughts. "What brings you here today, Hazuki?"

"I'm just… checking up on this Sekai," he said simply, hands in his pockets.

“Oh! I heard from the other Miku that you visited the Street Sekai,” the Miku beside the window said, tilting her head curiously. “How was it?”

Yuu hesitated for a moment, searching for the words.

“Well… it was different,” he said, glancing at the desks, the chalkboard, the quiet hum of familiarity in the air. “Really different from the School Sekai.”

He paused, then added with a small smile, “…But in a good way.”

“Are you guys here as usual?” Yuu asked, slipping his hands into his pockets as he looked around the classroom-turned-stage.

“Yeah,” Miku replied with a bright nod. “We’re going to practice today.”

“Leo/need practice, huh…” Yuu murmured. “I’m curious, but—”

Before he could finish, a gentle chime shimmered through the air, followed by two new presences appearing in the room, as if stepping out of thin air.

“Good morning,” said a calm voice.

The first to emerge was a girl with short, tousled gray hair and sharp green eyes, her face expressionless like a locked diary.

Just behind her was a much more colorful figure—long blonde hair tipped with soft pink, styled into puffy twin tails, and eyes that sparkled a gentle pink.

The moment they saw Yuu, they stopped.

“Who are you?!” the gray-haired girl snapped, quickly stepping in front of Miku and Ichika with the stance of someone used to shielding others.

Yuu stiffened slightly under her gaze.

Uwah… as expected of a cold person.

He bowed politely, keeping his voice steady. “Hello. I’m Yuu Hazuki.”

The girl with the fluffy twin tails lit up, tilting her head with bright curiosity. “Wow! I didn’t expect a new face in this Sekai!”

“Saki! Come here—we don’t know this guy!” the stern girl hissed, grabbing the blonde’s wrist and pulling her back to her side protectively.

Miku stepped forward before things could escalate. “Calm down, everyone. I know him.”

“What?” The gray-haired girl—Shiho, Yuu guessed—stared at Ichika with open disbelief. “You know him? How? Also—how did he even get in here?”

Ichika simply gave a small nod. “Because he’s different.”

“Different?” Shiho and the blonde said in unison, blinking.

Miku clasped her hands in front of her chest. “He’s not like others. He can enter different Sekai. And… he’s already helped us once.”

There was a pause.

Tension hung for a moment, like a held breath.

Then Ichika stepped in, her voice gentle. “F-For now… let’s do introductions.”

She gestured between the two girls. “Hazuki, this is Tenma Saki,” she said, pointing to the blonde, who gave a small, excited wave. “And she’s Hinomori Shiho.”

“Nice to meet you,” Yuu said with a slight bow.

Shiho didn’t reply immediately—her eyes narrowed with skepticism. But she nodded after a beat, slow and deliberate.

Saki beamed. “Well, if Miku and Ichika trust you, then I guess it’s okay!”

Shiho muttered something under her breath, arms still crossed—but she didn’t protest further.

Yuu allowed himself a small breath of relief.

Looks like I’m getting better at surviving first impressions.

Just as the air started to settle from Shiho’s cold defense and Saki’s curiosity, the familiar ripple of light shimmered across the Sekai—

And another figure materialized right in the middle of the schoolyard.

“Sorry, I’m late!” the girl called, slightly out of breath.

Yuu turned toward the voice just as the girl straightened her posture, brushing back a few strands of light dusty rose hair tied up in a side ponytail with a blue scrunchie. Her blue eyes were wide with energy, and the smile she wore looked almost apologetic—but warm, undeniably so.

She blinked when she saw him.

“Huh? Wh–Who are you?”

Yuu raised a hand halfway, awkwardly.

“Erm… Do we need to introduce again?” he asked, glancing sideways at Miku and Ichika for help.

Ichika let out a soft breath and offered a gentle smile. “It’s alright, Honami. This is Hazuki Yuu. He’s… a bit of a special case.”

“A friend,” Miku added with a wink.

"Eh?! Really?"

Honami’s eyes widened as she took a step closer, scanning Yuu with growing curiosity. “That’s possible?”

“...He just showed up,” Shiho muttered from behind her crossed arms, still eyeing Yuu like a suspicious transfer student.

Yuu scratched the back of his neck, offering Honami a small, polite smile. “Nice to meet you. I didn’t mean to intrude or anything.”

“Oh! No, not at all!” Honami quickly waved her hands in front of her, flustered. “Sorry for reacting like that—just didn’t expect someone new in our Sekai. I’m Mochizuki Honami.”

“She’s kind of like the team’s emotional support,” Saki teased, giggling.

“Saki…” Honami sighed, embarrassed but smiling all the same.

And just like that, the tension loosened—just a little.

The Leo/need girls stood around Yuu now, each with their own posture, expression, and questions hiding behind their eyes.

Yuu glanced around at them, Ichika’s quiet patience, Saki’s glowing cheer, Shiho’s guarded stare, and Honami’s warm confusion.

This really was a tightly-knit group.

A group with history.

And now, he was standing right in the middle of it.

Luka clapped her hands together with a graceful smile. “Now then, everyone! Since introductions are out of the way, let’s focus on practice.”

The warm sunlight streamed through the classroom windows of the School Sekai as the four girls began moving to their usual spots—picking up instruments, checking cords, tuning strings.

A familiar quiet rhythm of routine settled in.

But not for Shiho.

Her sharp green eyes locked onto Yuu, brows furrowing.

“…Why is he still here?”

Yuu flinched slightly under the sudden pressure, the weight of her glare sharper than any guitar string.

“Oh! I forgot to mention,” Ichika chimed in, sliding her guitar strap over her shoulder, “he’s here to watch us practice.”

“H-Huh?!” Shiho spun toward her. “This is the first time I’m hearing about that! And why didn’t you tell us beforehand?”

“I, um… thought it would be fine,” Ichika said softly, looking a little sheepish but not backing down. “He’s already seen Vivid BAD SQUAD practice.”

“That’s not the point.” Shiho groaned, pinching the bridge of her nose. “This is our private practice session. Not a stage show.”

“I’m okay with it!” Saki said cheerfully, adjusting the height of her keyboard. “It might be fun to have an audience!”

“I-I mean…” Honami looked between everyone nervously. “If he’s just watching quietly, it should be alright, right?”

Shiho’s eyes narrowed. “Tch… whatever. Just don’t get in the way.”

Yuu raised both hands in surrender. “I’ll just be over here, not moving a muscle.”

Shiho huffed and turned away, picking up her bass with sharp, practiced movements.

“Jeez,” Saki whispered playfully to Yuu as she passed by. “She’s always like this with new people. Don’t take it personally.”

“I won’t,” Yuu muttered.

But still… Shiho’s glare had real power behind it.

As the four settled into position and Luka took her place at the side, clipboard in hand, Yuu quietly stepped back against the wall, observing.

This is Leo/need’s space…

Guess I’ll have to earn their trust one step at a time.

Just as the gentle hum of tuning instruments filled the School Sekai’s music room, a faint chime echoed in front of Yuu.

A holographic UI blinked to life before his eyes—soft light dancing in the air, clear and familiar.

Yuu sighed quietly.

“So it wants me to perform with them… huh. Am I gonna get dragged into this every time someone starts playing?”

Still, he wasn’t annoyed.

If anything, a part of him welcomed the challenge.

Raising his hand a little hesitantly, he spoke up. “Uhm… if it’s okay—can I join you for this one?”

The room paused.

“What?” Shiho said flatly, brows narrowing again.

But before she could follow up, Miku suddenly gasped and rushed over to him, eyes sparkling.

“Perform? Really?!” she beamed, taking his hands with a burst of enthusiasm. “That’s amazing!”

“Y-Yeah,” Yuu replied, slightly flustered but smiling.

I might as well get used to this.

“I think it’s a great idea!” Miku said, spinning lightly with excitement. “Let’s show him off, everyone!”

“I—I wouldn’t call it a talent,” Yuu muttered, scratching the back of his neck.

“That’s not for you to decide,” Saki chimed in cheerfully, eyes already sparkling with interest. “I wanna see this!”

Meanwhile, Shiho shot Ichika a pointed glance. “We’re talking after practice.”

Ichika gave a calm nod. “I know.”

Turning back to the hologram screen, Yuu read the song title slowly under his breath.

[Stella]

Difficulty levels danced underneath.

[Easy] [Normal] [Hard] [Expert] [Master]

He cracked his knuckles and rolled his shoulders.

Still in his pajamas, he gave a light breath and tapped [Master].

In an instant, his clothes shimmered, pixels and particles weaving around his form.

When the light faded, he now wore the signature Leo/need outfit.

Black and gray tones, sleek lines, layered textures. A performance-ready design that matched the tone of the band.

“Huh?!” Saki nearly dropped her keytar. “He even got our unit attire?! That’s so cool!”

Yuu looked down at himself, flexing one arm. “Oh. Right. I forgot the Sekai does this…”

“You wear it well,” Honami said with a soft smile.

Even Shiho glanced sideways, briefly, but noticeably.

Ichika gave him a small, encouraging nod. “Ready?”

Yuu inhaled, then stepped forward to join them.

But this, Yuu didn’t expect.

Just as the loading screen faded and the music stage shimmered into place, something heavy pressed against his side—smooth, familiar, and completely unexpected.

He looked down.

A guitar.

Strapped diagonally across his torso, the matte-black body gleamed under the soft Sekai lights, accented with faint blue lines pulsing to the rhythm of the still-loading track.

His fingers rested naturally near the fretboard, callouses tingling as if they remembered something he didn't.

"Wait—what…?"

Yuu blinked, eyes wide.

He wasn't standing at the front to dance like in Street Sekai. This time, he was positioned slightly to the left, shoulder-to-shoulder with Ichika, and a few steps ahead of Saki's keyboard.

"You didn't think Leo/need was all vocals and movement, did you?" Miku grinned, already adjusting the mic stand nearby. "Here, the music speaks first."

Saki giggled. "Guess the Sekai thinks you're the guitar type!"

"I… don't even play guitar that much," Yuu muttered under his breath, but his fingers betrayed him, already testing the strings, strumming a chord that resonated a bit too perfectly.

Shiho gave him a passing glance. "Then you better start."

The countdown echoed across the stage.

3.
2.
1.

Yuu took a breath.

His grip tightened on the guitar.

One thing Yuu quickly learned—
something he would never forget:

In this world, in the Sekai…

Not every performance means dancing.

Sometimes, the rhythm pulled him into song

Other times, his fingers would move across strings or keys,

And in some Sekai, he'd find himself at a DJ deck, remixing tracks on instinct alone.

Every stage demanded something new.

Every performance revealed a different side of him.

There was no comfort zone here.

Only growth, disguised as chaos.

And Yuu?

He would learn to expect it.

To adapt.

To trust that no matter what the Sekai asked of him—

He'd be ready.

And just like that, the practice came to an end—

Quiet, unremarkable… but not meaningless.

Yuu let the final note trail into silence, the echo of the guitar fading gently into the air.

His fingers tingled with strain, not pain.

His breathing was calm, but his heart?

Still racing.

Not perfect.

Not even great.

But real.

He exhaled, rubbing the back of his neck awkwardly as he turned to the others, a sheepish smile tugging at his lips.

"…Yeah, that could've gone better."

Saki clapped anyway, her enthusiasm undimmed. "That was amazing for your first try! You kept up with us!"

Honami offered a soft, encouraging nod. "You didn't give up. That's what matters."

Ichika smiled faintly, eyes warm. "Everyone stumbles. But you didn't stop. That's the kind of strength we need."

And then—

Shiho folded her arms, gaze fixed squarely on Yuu.

Her voice came cool and blunt, but beneath it was something almost like approval.

"…You'll improve. If you're serious."

That made everyone pause.

Ichika blinked in surprise. "Wait, that's it? No scolding?"

"I was expecting her to tear him apart," Saki whispered loudly, her eyes wide with mock betrayal.

“Well,” Honami added with a small laugh, “he did better than I did during my first time too.”

The air was light with laughter, but then—

Luka, who had been watching silently, turned to Miku with a rare seriousness in her expression.

“Miku,” she said, her voice low but firm, “do you think it’s possible to have Hazuki Yuu as Leo/need’s backup?”

Miku tilted her head thoughtfully, then nodded without hesitation. “It’s possible.”

She turned to Yuu, her eyes gleaming.

“Hazuki, if you want to keep learning guitar—if you want to keep moving forward—would you join Leo/need as our backup?”

The question hung in the air like a final chord.

Yuu hesitated, eyes flickering between Ichika and Miku.

He thought of the School Sekai.

Of the non-existence of Sekai

Of the non-existent Miku—her quiet plea in a place no one else could hear.

If he wanted to save that Sekai…

If he wanted to reach that Miku…

Then he’d have to grow stronger.

His performances had to become more than good.

They had to be perfect.

He straightened slowly, meeting their eyes.

“I accept.”

Saki beamed. Honami gave a pleased hum. Even Shiho looked mildly satisfied.

Ichika stepped forward with a soft smile and held out her hand.

“Then—welcome to Leo/need, Yuu.”

Yuu looked down at her hand for a moment, then reached out and clasped it.

Warm. Steady.
Real.

“Glad to be here,” he said quietly.

And just like that, their practice came to a quiet close.

With warm goodbyes and lingering smiles, each member slowly faded from the [School Sekai], their bodies dissolving into gentle motes of light—scattered sparks returning to their own world, their own morning routines.

The classroom stilled.

The music faded.

And the moment passed.

[POV: Leo/need Group Chat]

Back in reality, the four girls settled into the familiar comfort of their rooms, the quiet hum of their devices grounding them after the immersive rhythm of the Sekai. It didn't take long before Ichika started the group video call.

The screen lit up with Ichika's face first.

The lighting was soft, her room as modest and neat as always.

She brushed a loose strand of hair from her cheek and leaned toward the screen.

"Good morning," she said, voice gentle, a faint smile on her lips.

"Good mooorning~!" Saki chirped in next, her background bursting with color, posters, plushies, bright walls full of life.

"Morning," Honami greeted quietly, sipping tea from a mug, sunlight casting golden lines across her desk.

Shiho was the last to appear. Arms crossed, her face unreadable as usual, with her camera pointed toward a shelf of books and worn record sleeves. "Hello."

Ichika's eyes scanned each of them. After a small pause, she leaned forward.

"So… what do you think about Hazuki-kun?"

Saki immediately lit up, bouncing in place as if she couldn't hold it in. "He was amazing! Like, he just picked up the guitar and played! And don't even get me started on that outfit change, seriously, where did that come from?! He looked so cool!"

Honami nodded, thoughtful. "He was nervous… but he didn't stop. He kept up, even on a difficult song. That says a lot."

Ichika smiled faintly, the corners of her eyes softening. "He didn't have to join. But he wanted to. I think he's trying really hard."

But the moment lingered just a second too long.

Shiho's expression darkened slightly.

“…Ichika,” she said, her tone quiet but direct. “Why didn’t you tell us about him before today?”

The question hung in the air.

Unspoken, but heavy.

She wasn’t wrong. Leo/need wasn’t just a band.

It was their band, a bond forged through years of childhood memories, shared pain, and healing through music.

Letting someone into that space, especially without a word, was no small thing.

Ichika lowered her gaze.

“I’m sorry,” she said quietly. “I should’ve told you.”

Shiho shifted, eyes flickering off-camera for a moment. “I mean… You should’ve. But I’m not angry. Just caught off guard.”

Honami glanced at her with concern. “Shiho…”

Shiho waved her off before she could speak further. “It’s fine. I’m not saying we kick him out or anything. Just… next time, let us know first. Especially if you’re inviting someone into our Sekai.”

Ichika nodded. “You’re right. I promise I will.”

There was a beat of silence, brief but meaningful.

Then Saki, as always, broke it with a bright smile. “Well, what’s done is done! And honestly, I think Hazuki-kun fits right in. I’m already excited for the next session!”

Ichika’s smile returned, this time a little more sure.

“Yeah,” she said. “Me too.”

“Hm?” Honami murmured, her brows drawing together thoughtfully. “Now that I think about it… Ichika, Hazuki isn’t a Virtual Singer, is he?”

Ichika shook her head gently. “He’s not.”

“Ehh?!” Saki’s face lit up in surprise. “Wait—you’ve met him?! Like, in real life?!”

Ichika nodded, calm as ever. “Yeah. I have.”

“That’s surprising…” Saki leaned closer to her camera, eyes sparkling with curiosity. “He kind of looks like KAITO, but with black hair, doesn’t he?”

Shiho, who had been quietly listening until now, narrowed her eyes. “How did you meet him, Ichika?”

Ichika hesitated for a moment, then glanced off to the side as if replaying the memory. The soft glow of her room framed her face, lending a weight to her words.

"Well..."

Ichika tried to make up a reason.

Ichika's gaze drifted to the side, her fingers fidgeting just out of frame. A soft breath escaped her lips before she looked back at the screen, trying to hold her composure.

"Well…" she began, choosing her words carefully, "we bumped into each other outside of school a few weeks ago."

There was a pause.

"Outside of school?" Honami repeated, her voice tinted with polite confusion. "Like… randomly?"

Ichika nodded, trying not to let her hesitation show. "Yeah. He was… kind of lost, I think. I helped him out, and we started talking. That's when I learned he could enter the Sekai."

Saki blinked, mouth open slightly. "Wait, wait—you mean he wasn't even invited by Miku? He just… showed up?!"

"I thought only those with strong feelings could create or enter a Sekai," Honami said slowly, her expression pensive.

Shiho didn't speak right away. But her eyes stayed fixed on Ichika. Unmoving. Sharp.

"That's not the full story," she said flatly.

Ichika's lips parted, then closed again. Her eyes dropped. "…It's not."

Silence filled the call.

For a moment, it was just the soft buzz of connection holding them all together.

Ichika finally looked up again, her voice quieter.

"I'm sorry. I don't have all the answers either. I just… I felt like I had to help him. Like he's meant to be here—even if the how doesn't make sense yet."

Honami's brows furrowed, but her voice remained kind. "You trust him."

"I do," Ichika said simply.

Saki leaned back in her seat, arms crossed thoughtfully. "Well… I don't get it, but I trust you, Ichika. And Hazuki was fun! So I'll give him a chance!"

Shiho sighed, rubbing her temple. "You all are too trusting…"

But after a pause, she added, "Still. I'll keep an eye on him. Especially if he's going to be involved with Leo/need."

Ichika smiled gently. "That's all I ask."

And with that, the tension eased—if only slightly.

Whatever secrets lingered behind Ichika's careful words, they would have to wait.

[Yuu Hazuki – POV]

"Hmm…"

Yuu stood in the middle of his room, fingertips brushing the collar of his shirt as he tapped his phone screen, switching from his Sekai outfit back to his casual clothes. The transition always left a faint tingle across his skin—like shaking off the last echo of a dream.

He ran a hand through his hair and headed downstairs.

"Good morning," he greeted, his voice still carrying a trace of sleep.

His mother looked up from the kitchen, already plating up toast. "Morning!"

"Hey… do you know where I put my guitar?"

She paused, blinking. "Hmm? The acoustic one? I think it's still in your room, isn't it? Leaned against the wall near the bookshelf?"

Yuu frowned lightly, glancing over his shoulder as if he could see it from the staircase. "Really? I must've missed it. Thanks."

His mother narrowed her eyes at him playfully, a grin tugging at the corners of her mouth. "Why the sudden interest in that old thing? I thought you gave up on the guitar ages ago."

Yuu shrugged, leaning against the doorframe. "Well… something changed."

"Ohhh?" Her voice took on a teasing lilt. "Was it… Ichika-chan?"

Yuu groaned softly, pressing a hand to his forehead. "Mother, joking this early in the morning is a terrible habit."

She just laughed, her eyes twinkling. "I'm just saying that smile of yours when you came down… it wasn't just about music."

"I literally just want to get better at guitar," Yuu muttered under his breath as he turned to head back upstairs.

Just as Yuu stepped back into his room, he paused at the threshold, letting his gaze sweep across the space with new purpose.

The morning sunlight had shifted since earlier, now casting long slants of gold across the wooden floor, giving everything a strangely nostalgic glow.

He took a breath and began his search.

First, he crouched down, checking beneath the bed—just dust bunnies and a crumpled hoodie he swore he'd washed.

Then behind the door—still nothing. His eyes moved to the bookshelf.

A small, uneven gap between the bottom row of books. One of the spines was pushed just a little too far back.

"…Wait a sec."

He stepped forward and slid aside a thick astronomy textbook, its cover faded and corners dog-eared. There was a soft thunk as something shifted behind it.

Yuu blinked.

Wedged awkwardly between the bookshelf and the wall, almost like it had been hidden on purpose, was his old acoustic guitar.

"Seriously?" he muttered under his breath, pulling it free with care. "I stuffed it there?"

The guitar emerged with a faint creak, dust clinging to its body like it hadn't been touched in years.

The polished wood had dulled with time, but the shape, familiar curve of the neck, the subtle scratches on the surface, was unmistakably his.

He sank onto the edge of his bed, cradling the instrument in his arms like something fragile and old.

The guitar felt heavier than he remembered.

One string was missing entirely, the rest loose and dull.

He ran a thumb across the fretboard, a faint, uneven buzz humming through the stillness of the room. It wasn't music—just a ghost of it.

He exhaled slowly.

"…Should I just buy a new one?"

Maybe he should.

But as he stared at the worn wood, at the places where his fingers had once fumbled through chords and melodies, he hesitated.

I should.

Yuu gently placed the old guitar on the bed, letting it rest atop the tangled sheets like a fragile relic.

His fingers lingered on the wood for a second longer before he turned away, reaching for his phone on the desk.

With a quick tap, he brought up his contacts and pressed the call button.

It rang only once before a familiar voice answered.

"Hello?"

"Good morning," Yuu said, his tone casual but steady. "Are you free later today?"

A brief pause followed on the other end, then a reply.

"…Yeah. I can be."

"Alright. I'll see you then."

He ended the call and set the phone back down on the desk.

His eyes flicked to the clock, then to the guitar again.

Well then... time to prepare.

Without another word, Yuu crossed to the closet and began picking out clothes—simple, clean, something easy to move in.

He laid each piece of clothing on the chair.

Meanwhile…

In a sunlit room just across the city, a phone was gently placed back on a desk.

"I didn't expect that…" An murmured, her lips curling into a quiet smile.

She stood up, brushing back her hair as she moved toward her closet.

With a hum under her breath, she started flipping through clothes—her expression light, almost giddy, though she tried to hide it even from herself.

Just then, a voice called from beyond the door.

"An… breakfast is ready."

The door cracked open, revealing her father, still dressed in his apron, eyebrows raised.

He blinked at the sight of his daughter already halfway dressed and moving with unusual energy.

"What are you doing?"

"Oh?" An turned with a sheepish grin. "I'm going out somewhere."

"With someone?"

"Yeah," she replied simply, not elaborating further.

He studied her for a second, then nodded. "I see… Should I put your food in the fridge for later?"

"No, no," she waved her hand. "I'll eat it now."

Her father smiled softly. "Alright then."

He stepped away, leaving the door slightly ajar behind him.

Alone again, An held up a jacket to the mirror, inspecting it with a glint in her eye.

Today felt… different.

And for some reason, she didn’t mind that at all.

Chapter End Notes

Hello everyone! ExitCue here... All I'm saying is thank you for reading this fic, so far no one's criticizing my work yet, and I'm hoping that someone will give me some advice or suggestions. Thank you for the kudos, and I hope you all have a great day! – ExitCue

Chapter 10: Looking For The Right Partner

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

As soon as I finished preparing, shirt neatly ironed, jacket draped over one arm, and hair brushed into something that didn't scream "just rolled out of bed" I gave myself a quick glance in the mirror.

Not out of vanity.

Just to make sure I looked… right.

Presentable.

And strangely enough, it made me more nervous than performing a Master-difficulty routine

I picked up my phone from the desk, checked the time, and slipped it into my pocket with a quiet exhale.

"All right," I muttered to myself. "Let's go."

Just as I passed through the living room, I heard my mother's voice.

"Heading out?"

"Yeah," I replied, adjusting the strap of my bag as I made for the door.

She gave me a look over, casual, but sharp in the way only mothers can manage.

Her eyes narrowed ever so slightly.

"You've been going out a lot lately…" she said, tapping a finger against her mug. "Is it a date?"

I paused, crouching to slip on my shoes near the genkan.

(Author Note: What is genkan? Genkan (玄関) is a traditional Japanese entryway area found at the entrance of homes (and some buildings). It's where people remove their shoes before stepping onto the raised floor of the house. The genkan typically has:
A lower step or recessed floor area where shoes are taken off, A shoe rack or shelf (getabako) nearby, A clear transition between "outside" and "inside." In short, it's the place where: You take off your shoes, You step up onto the clean floor inside. After all in Japanese culture, it's considered rude to step into the house without removing your shoes first.)

The corner of my mouth lifted.

"…I guess you could call it that."

A knowing sigh escaped her lips. "Ah, so? Well, have fun."

"Mm," I nodded, and with that, I stepped outside into the quiet hum of the late morning sun.

The city air carried the weight of early afternoon—not stifling, but warm enough to cling faintly to the skin. A lazy breeze threaded through the streets, rustling trees and lifting the corners of loose flyers.

Yuu walked with a steady rhythm, hands tucked into the pockets of his jacket. His earbuds were in, but no music played—just a silent comfort, a barrier between him and the low hum of traffic, distant conversations, the world continuing around him.

His thoughts, however, were elsewhere.

He wasn't sure why he felt so tense.
Maybe because this wasn't like the others.

There was no performance ahead.
No melody to follow, no rhythm to lean on, no lyrics to fill the silence.

Just… a meeting.

When he reached the small park near the station, he spotted her almost instantly.

The place was modest—a couple of benches, a stone path winding past flowering trees, and a fountain that caught the sunlight like fractured glass.

There, standing beneath the dappled shade of a tall tree, was An Shiraishi.

She wasn't in her usual school uniform.

A pale blouse, neatly tucked into a navy skirt, gave her an effortlessly clean look, and a light cardigan hung loosely from her shoulders.

Her bag was slung across one side, and one foot tapped idly against the cobblestone as she scrolled through her phone.

Yuu slowed his pace, taking her in quietly.

She looked… different.

More casual.

More real.

And when she glanced up and saw him, her expression shifted—just slightly—but enough. The curve of her lips softened. Her eyes met his with something familiar.

"You're early," she said, slipping her phone into her bag.

Yuu offered a faint smile. "You're earlier."

A small chuckle escaped her lips, light and easy. "Touché."

"T-Tou what?" Yuu asked, brows knitting together.

An blinked, then suddenly burst into laughter. “Pfft—aha! Oh my god.” She clutched her side with one hand and covered her mouth with the other, her laughter light but unrestrained. “You seriously don’t know what touché means?”

A light flush crept up Yuu’s neck as he scratched awkwardly at the back of his head. “Well… I kinda guessed? Is it French or something?”

“It is French,” An said, still chuckling as she wiped a corner of her eye. “It just means ‘fair point.’ You said I was earlier, so I said touché.”

Yuu blinked. “Huh. That’s fancy.”

With a smirk, An nudged his arm playfully. “You should really pick up foreign words sometime.”

“I listen,” he muttered, half-defensive. “Just… not that into them.”

Her smirk widened, eyes gleaming with teasing warmth. “Well then, guess I’ll start teaching you. One word per hangout. By the end of the year, you’ll sound like a cultured prince.”

Yuu sighed and jammed his hands deeper into his jacket pockets. “I’d settle for just not sounding like an idiot.”

“You don’t sound like an idiot,” she replied casually, then added with a grin over her shoulder, “You just have moments.”

He groaned. “Gee, thanks.”

An only laughed—softer now, more relaxed. Her steps were light as they continued down the tree-lined path, the gravel crunching gently beneath their shoes. The sun filtered between the branches, dappled light painting soft patterns at their feet.

Despite the teasing, Yuu could feel it—something easier in the air between them.

It was just her.

Just them.

And that was enough.

“So,” An said after a quiet beat, glancing at him from the corner of her eye, “you hungry?”

Yuu blinked. “We’re getting food?”

“Obviously.” She jerked a thumb toward the road ahead, where the edges of the shopping district were just starting to appear. “There’s a crepe stand a few blocks down. I’ve been craving something sweet.”

He raised an eyebrow, mock suspicion in his tone. “Sweet, huh… Didn’t expect that from you.”

She shot him a mock glare, placing a hand on her hip. “Hey! I’m not all cool-girl and drop-the-beat, you know. I have cravings too.”

Yuu chuckled. “Right, right. Lead the way, Miss Sweet Tooth.”

An stuck her tongue out at him before turning and walking ahead, her shoulders relaxed, her voice drifting back with a familiar playfulness. “Come on, before I change my mind and buy all the crepes myself.”

And so, the two of them ordered crepes—one strawberry and cream, the other banana chocolate—and made their way to a quiet bench tucked beneath the shade of a leafy tree.

The soft hum of the shopping district lingered nearby, but here, it felt peaceful. Slower.

An took a bite of her crepe, then glanced at Yuu from the corner of her eye.

“So?” she asked, her voice light but curious. “You said on the phone you were looking for a guitar. Acoustic?”

Yuu leaned back slightly, crepe in hand. “I want something new. Something that fits me better.”

An tilted her head, a thoughtful look crossing her face. “Hmm~ well, you called the right person.”

“That’s why I called you.”

She grinned, a little smug. “Flattery’ll get you far, Hazuki.”

He chuckled under his breath, eyes soft. “It wasn’t flattery. Just facts.”

An rolled her eyes playfully and took another bite, clearly pleased all the same.

“Alright then,” she said after a moment, brushing a crumb from her lap. “Once we’re done here, let’s hit the music store. I know a couple that have solid selections—decent price, too.”

Yuu nodded.

A breeze drifted past, rustling the leaves above them.

Neither said anything for a few seconds, just quietly enjoying the sweetness of their crepes and the quiet between them.

As the minutes drifted by, the two talked about nothing in particular, and yet everything that mattered.

An shared a few stories from Vivid BAD SQUAD’s early days.

Yuu listened, genuinely interested, occasionally offering a few stories of his own—about school, about the quiet struggles of stepping into something bigger than himself.

There was laughter.

Little teases.

Moments of thoughtful silence.

And before they knew it, the crepes were gone, only thin wrappers left in their hands, slightly sticky from the melted cream.

An stood up, brushing off the back of her skirt. “Alright,” she said, stretching her arms above her head. “Time to find your new guitar.”

Yuu rose with her, slipping his hands back into his jacket pockets. “Lead the way, guide.”

With a grin, she nodded toward the main street. “The mall’s not far. Let’s go.”

And together, beneath the soft afternoon sun, they started walking side by side, the city buzzing gently around them.

As the glass doors slid open with a soft hiss, a cool gust of air spilled out, washing over them like a breath of relief. The transition from the sunlit streets to the air-conditioned corridors of the mall was instant—An’s cardigan fluttered lightly, her hair swaying with the shift.

The atmosphere inside was its own kind of chaos.

The mingling scents of coffee beans, fried snacks, and synthetic perfume hung in the air like an unseen fog. People moved in every direction—children tugging their parents along, teens crowding bubble tea stands, couples pausing to admire shop displays. Bits of pop music drifted in from open stores, clashing awkwardly with each other in a messy symphony of sound.

Yuu slowed for a moment, eyes flicking around.

It was overstimulating.

Bright, noisy, alive.

“Still not used to crowds?” An asked over her shoulder, just as she sidestepped a mall clerk trying to hand her a promo flyer. Her tone was light, teasing, but not unkind.

“I’m fine,” Yuu replied, falling into step beside her. “I just forgot malls were this loud.”

An grinned, weaving past a slow-moving couple like water slipping through cracks. “Then you’re lucky I’m leading. Music stores in this place are hidden like easter eggs—usually between a cat café and a claw machine hell.”

He followed her quietly, trying not to bump into anyone. The polished tiles reflected the overhead lights in cold glimmers, and the distant ring of arcade machines buzzed faintly through the air.

Then, finally, they rounded a corner.

There it was.

Set behind a wide glass front was a store that practically breathed music. Guitars hung like artwork along every wall, sleek electrics with bold colors, weathered acoustics with golden hues, hybrids that gleamed beneath spotlights.

Racks of cables, amps, effects pedals, and keyboards filled the center aisles, while shelves of records and sheet music framed the sides like a shrine for sound.

An slowed, coming to a stop just before the entrance. She turned to him with a playful glint in her eye.

“Welcome to the rabbit hole.”

Yuu took a step forward, the scent of polished wood and string oil already drifting toward him.

“Thanks,” he murmured.

And stepped inside.

Yuu paused near a display stand of mid-range electric guitars, their lacquered finishes catching the ceiling lights in soft glints.

His gaze drifted across the lineup—sleek, angular bodies, a few bursting with color, others more understated.

He hovered a hand over one—a matte black body with gold hardware—but didn’t touch it.

Not yet.

“You see something you like?” An’s voice came from beside him, light and easy. She leaned slightly to one side, her hands folded behind her back as she peered at the guitars with casual interest.

“…Still looking,” Yuu murmured. “They all look good.”

“They are good,” she said, shrugging. “But not all of them are you.”

He glanced at her.

She met his look with a smug grin. “What? Don’t look at me like that. Guitars aren’t just instruments—they’ve got personality. Vibe. You don’t pick the flashiest one, you pick the one that feels like it already knows how you play.”

“…Sounds like something a guitar would say.”

An smirked. “And if you pick the wrong one, I’m totally making you play on a hot pink lightning-bolt model in front of the café.”

Yuu groaned softly. “You’re enjoying this way too much.”

“Absolutely.”

He chuckled under his breath, the tension in his shoulders easing a little. Then his hand drifted toward a different guitar—an acoustic, nestled quietly to the side. Its dark cedar finish had no excessive shine, no fancy design—just clean lines and a quiet warmth.

His fingers brushed the smooth body.

Simlpe.

Balanced.

Honest.

“…This one feels right,” he said, almost to himself.

An leaned in slightly, examining it. “Solid top. Dreadnought cut. That’s a good build—strong resonance and decent projection. Nice choice.”

Yuu raised a brow. “You sure you’re not secretly a music store employee?”

She puffed out her chest proudly. “Hey, I’m in a music group, remember? And my dad used to be a musician. Guitars were part of the décor growing up. I knew how to restring a bass before I could ride a bike.”

Yuu let out a quiet laugh as he lifted the guitar gently off the stand and rested it on his thigh.

e strummed a few tentative chords. The strings buzzed slightly—his muscle memory still shaky—but beneath it was a tone that resonated deep and warm.

Unpolished, but full of potential.

He strummed again, slower, more deliberate.

“I think I’ll take it.”

An tilted her head, watching his expression. “You sure?”

“Yeah,” he said, nodding once. “This one’s it.”

Together, they made their way to the register, Yuu carrying the guitar with a strange sense of déjà vu—like something he’d once lost had found its way back to him.

As the cashier rang it up, An leaned casually against the counter beside him, tapping her fingers rhythmically along the wood.

“So,” she said, her voice playful, “how about we test it out right after this?”

Yuu glanced at her. “Test it out?”

She grinned. “Let’s perform outside. I’ll sing, you play. A little street gig. Nothing big.”

“…That’s sudden.”

“Spontaneity is the soul of music,” she replied, matter-of-factly. “Besides, you’ve been dancing and playing in a Sekai, but have you played where it counts?”

He paused, then gave a half-smile. “What, the sidewalk?”

“The people."

Yuu looked down at the guitar, fingers resting over the strings.

“…Alright,” he said. “Let’s do it.”

An beamed. “That’s what I’m talking about.”

As soon as Yuu stepped away from the counter, receipt in one hand, the brand-new guitar case slung neatly over his shoulder, he took a moment to adjust the strap.

The weight felt unfamiliar, but not unwelcome. Like something he was ready to carry.

He turned toward An, who gave him a quick once-over, eyes glinting with approval.

“Hmm~” she mused, a grin spreading across her face. “You look cooler with that.”

Yuu raised a brow, amused. “Cooler, huh?”

“Yeah,” she said, arms crossing with a casual air. “Like someone with a story.”

“Story, huh…” he echoed, his gaze drifting briefly toward the polished floor.

He couldn't exactly deny it. Not when his existence straddled reality and something far stranger.

A digital world.

A mission.

A Miku that needed saving.

A half-smile tugged at his lips.

“…Guess that makes me the quiet type in a band drama.”

An snorted. “Pfft. More like the brooding lead guitarist who secretly writes poetry.”

Yuu rolled his eyes, chuckling. “Right.”

She stepped forward, already heading for the exit. “Come on. Didn’t we say we’d perform?”

“Yeah, yeah…”

As they moved past the automatic doors, the warm air of the city greeted them again, less harsh now, mellow with the fading afternoon sun.

Crowds still bustled, voices and footsteps blending into an urban rhythm.

Yuu followed a few steps behind, hand resting on the strap of his guitar.

I almost forgot… he thought, the lightness from earlier slowly grounding into something heavier. My goals.

Why I'm here.

That was close… I nearly lost myself just enjoying the moment.

“Hazuki!” An called from ahead, already at the sidewalk with one hand on her hip. “Hurry up, slowpoke!”

He blinked, then smiled again.

“…Coming, coming.”

And with that, he jogged forward, chasing both the girl in front of him

But maybe…

It wasn't so bad to let go.

Just for a little while.

The sun had begun its slow descent, casting a warm amber glow across the pavement as the two of them settled near the edge of the park. The sidewalk stretched out beside them, not too crowded—just the occasional passerby, the hum of distant conversation, the breeze carrying traces of a Sunday well spent.

It was quiet enough to feel personal. Open enough for music to breathe.

Yuu knelt beside the planter and unzipped the guitar case with careful fingers, almost reverent. The brand-new instrument caught the soft light and gleamed faintly—still unfamiliar, but already beginning to feel like his.

He sat on the low ledge, resting the guitar on his knee. A soft strum passed through the strings, tentative and clean. He paused, turned the tuning pegs gently, testing each note with a careful ear.

Then he looked up.

"What song?" he asked.

An was already standing in front of him, arms folded loosely. She tapped a finger against her chin in mock contemplation, lips curling into a sly smile as the breeze teased at her cardigan.

"How about LIFE?" she said. "From MILGRAM."

Yuu blinked, then gave a small nod. "I think I can manage that. I've heard it a few times."

"Good," she said with a soft grin, brushing a strand of hair behind her ear. "It suits this mood."

He ran a hand along the strings again, slower this time. His gaze dropped to the fretboard.

"…Yeah," he murmured. "It does."

Then, without another word, he began to play.

The notes rose slowly—gentle, deliberate, and full of something unspoken.

Not practiced perfection, but raw presence. The music floated out into the amber-lit air, weaving between footsteps and fading conversations.

A few heads turned.

A pair of children paused near the park gate.

An stood beside him, her expression calm, and as the rhythm took hold, she began to sing.

They weren't on a stage.

There were no spotlights.

Just pavement, warm evening light, and two people filling the silence with something real.

And for Yuu, for the first time in a while, that was enough.

Soon the park surrounded us, with An's voice and with my guitar.
Soon, the park began to shift.

Drawn by the sound, soft but steady, unfiltered and true, people slowed their steps.

A few stopped entirely. Phones were raised, camera lights blinking on like tiny stars at twilight.

But neither of them paid it much mind.

An’s voice, cool and expressive, flowed with practiced ease.

Yuu matched her rhythm with growing confidence, his fingers easing into the fretboard, letting the strings speak with him.

It wasn’t rehearsed.

It wasn’t polished.

And yet, something about it felt complete.

Children sat cross-legged a short distance away, their eyes wide with curiosity.

Yuu didn't notice the clicks of phone cameras or the quiet murmurs of admiration.

He was too focused on the sound. On An’s voice brushing against the chords.

On the wind.

On the warmth of the sun clinging to its last stand of light.

When the final note rang out and the melody faded, there was a hush.

Not silence, but something reverent.

And then—soft clapping.

Someone whistled.

Another called out, “Encore!”

Yuu looked up, startled.

An laughed, brushing sweat from her brow, her smile radiant beneath the dimming sky.

They soon bolted from the growing crowd.

Laughter still clung to An’s lips as she grabbed Yuu’s wrist, tugging him along without hesitation.

“Come on! before someone makes us livestream the next song!” she said through breathless giggles.

Yuu, still blinking from the sudden shift, slung his guitar back into its case in record time, the adrenaline of performance now replaced with the rush of escape.

He barely had time to zip it shut before An's momentum yanked him forward.

They darted between curious onlookers and murmuring fans, weaving through benches and trees, past the flickering streetlamps that had just begun to wake.

"Was that supposed to happen?" Yuu called, half-laughing, half-panicked.

"Nope!" An grinned over her shoulder. "But it was fun, wasn't it?!"

Yuu didn't answer right away.

His breath came fast as they rounded a quiet corner of the park, their footsteps slowing only once the crowd was out of sight.

Finally, they stopped, tucked away behind a cluster of tall hedges, the city muffled, the amber sky now slipping into violet.

An tilted her head, a small laugh still lingering at the edge of her lips.

"Right?" she said, her voice softer now, almost hushed by the twilight around them. "It's different when it's not a stage."

Yuu nodded, gaze drifting toward the dusky horizon. "Felt more real."

An pushed off the tree with a light stretch, then took a step closer, her expression gentler than before.

"You looked alive out there," she said. "Not like 'I'm in a performance' kind of alive—but like... like you were just being you."

Yuu blinked, unsure how to respond at first. "I didn't really think about it. I just played."

"That's the best kind," she said with a small smile, tucking her hands into her pockets. "Music without expectations."

He looked at her again, taking in the way her eyes softened when she spoke like that, earnest, without a hint of irony.

"I guess," he murmured. "You helped."

An smirked. "Obviously. I carried that performance."

Yuu rolled his eyes. "Sure you did."

She laughed, not denying it.

The two of them stood there for a moment more, the city humming quietly around them, the last light of day bleeding into a velvet sky.

And though no song played, and no crowd watched, Yuu felt something stir again in his chest.

Something quiet.

Something warm.

“…Thanks, An,” he said.

“For what?”

He met her eyes. “For today.”

She blinked, caught off-guard for just a second, then smiled, a little more tender this time.

“Anytime, Hazuki.”

And just like that, their little… date came to an end.

Neither of them had called it that, of course. The word never once passed their lips.
But the way their steps had fallen into rhythm, the soft ease in their laughter, the gentle quiet that came with their goodbye—it didn’t need to be said.

Yuu had walked An home first, like a proper companion, their conversation winding down with the soft glow of streetlights around them. They lingered at her gate, just long enough for it to feel like there was something else left to say. But instead of dragging it out, they exchanged a simple, familiar farewell.

“See you later.”

No drama.

No hand-holding.

No obvious blush.

And now…

“Good evening, Mom,” Yuu called as he stepped through the front door, his voice lighter than it had been in days.

From the living room, his mother glanced up from her book, cup of tea steaming gently in her hands. She raised an eyebrow, then smiled knowingly.

“Welcome back. Had fun?”

“…Yeah.”

He left it at that.

And she didn’t press.

In his room, Yuu placed the guitar case down gently by the side of his bed.

He sat at the edge of the mattress, eyes wandering for a moment before he lifted a hand.

With a swift motion, the glowing UI of Project SEKAI shimmered to life in front of him, illuminating his tired features with soft blue light.

But something was different.

A new tab blinked faintly in the corner, outlined in gentle pulses of color.

[You have unlocked: Skill Tree]

"…Skill tree?"

He tapped it.

Immediately, the screen unfolded—an intricate web of glowing nodes and branching paths, each pulsing softly like stars in a digital night sky. Icons of instruments, rhythm, vocals, performance, and even expression twinkled like hidden potentials waiting to be drawn out.

Some were locked.

Some were dim.

But others… responded to his gaze.

Yuu stared at it for a moment.

The idea of growth—visualized so cleanly, so simply.

"So… I can just cheat my way into talent now," he murmured dryly.

And yet, there was no resentment in his voice.

Just exhaustion.

Quiet acceptance.

He closed the interface with a swipe of his hand and flopped back onto the mattress, arms splayed across the covers.

"I'm too tired to think about that."

Minutes later, after brushing his teeth and pulling on his usual sleepwear, he collapsed under the sheets.

Just as he was about to close his eyes, his phone buzzed.

Shiraishi An: I had fun today! Let's invite everyone next time.

Yuu stared at the message, a quiet grin spreading across his lips.

He typed back, simply:

Sure.

And set the phone aside.

The light from the screen dimmed.

And the room, like the world outside, slipped into peace.

Chapter End Notes

Hello everyone! This was honestly one of the hardest chapters I've ever written, but also one of the most fulfilling.

Having to make sure An gives off the cool vibe is kinda hard since emotions are too powerful, but hey, I hope you guys liked it!

Chapter 11: Between Shelves and Silence

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

[MONDAY]

Morning arrived with the shrill cry of an alarm clock.

Yuu's hand shot out from beneath the blanket, fumbling blindly before slapping it quiet.

A breath escaped him as he sat up, the lingering haze of sleep clinging to his thoughts.

No time to lie around.

He swung his legs over the side of the bed and stood, stretching lightly.

The sunlight filtering through his curtains was soft and pale, too gentle for how loud his thoughts already felt.

Today felt... different. Subtle, maybe. But he could sense it.

A quiet tension hangs just beneath the surface.

He brushed a hand through his hair and muttered, "Alright. Let's get this day started."

"But before that..."

Still standing in the middle of his room, Yuu reached out and swiped the air in front of him.

With a soft shimmer, the Project Sekai hologram interface blinked to life, clean, glowing panels hovering before his eyes like a digital dream.

"I was too tired yesterday to bother checking it," he muttered, scrolling through the menus. "But I unlocked a skill tree, didn't I?"

He tapped the small (i) icon beside the [Skill Tree] tab.

Instantly, a message window popped up.

[Skill Tree Info]
There are branches of skills that can be used to enhance performance.
Use Skill Points (SP) to unlock abilities that increase rhythm, emotional delivery, coordination, and more.
Each skill node may unlock additional functions in Sekai or during live performances.

"Hmm... So I have 10 skill points…" he muttered, eyeing the shimmering SP counter in the corner.

He flicked his finger, and the tree expanded like constellations unfolding across the sky—branch after branch of strange and intriguing names, organized by color and shape.

[Beginner Path – Performer's Spark]

Timing Support (1 SP): Slightly widens the perfect input window.

Stage Presence I (2 SP): Boosts charisma during performances. Small increase in crowd response.

Memory of Music (3 SP): Unlocks fragments of musical intuition. Slightly improves the learning curve for new instruments.

Genius of Acting (4 SP): Enhances emotional expression during performances. Slightly increases immersion rate when portraying lyrics or story-driven songs. Ideal for dramatic solos or ensemble scenes.

Yuu stared at the last one.

Genius of Acting:
"Enhances emotional expression during performances... Slightly increases immersion rate... Ideal for dramatic solos..."

He rubbed the back of his neck.

"…Well, I guess if it helps, it helps."

The glowing nodes pulsed gently, waiting.

He scrolled down further.

[Locked Branches: Unlock at Performer Level 5]

Echo Soul, One Mind Ensemble, Dual Flow Coordination, Virtual Synchronization, Emotion Overdrive…

"So many skill names…" he muttered, narrowing his eyes. "What is this? An RPG or a music sim?"

Still, part of him couldn't deny it—he was curious. Deep down, it all felt a little too perfectly tailored.

Like this system wanted him to grow.

And it wasn't going to stop here.

"Well… let's try unlocking the beginner skills first," Yuu muttered, eyes sweeping over the intricate web of glowing nodes before him.

He raised a hand and tapped the nearest icon.

[Genius of Acting I]. A soft chime resonated through the air, almost musical in its tone.

The node lit up brilliantly for a moment before settling into a soft, steady blue glow.

One down.

Without hesitation, he tapped the next: [Stage Presence I]. Again, the same soothing sound played, and the icon shimmered before locking into place, now active.

Finally, his finger hovered over [Memory of Music I].

“Since I’m serious about learning the guitar again…” he whispered, and with a small nod, tapped the final node.

As the skill was activated, he felt it

A quiet spark lit within him, spreading outward like a soft, echoing memory.

It wasn’t knowledge, not yet, but familiarity.

The way fingers are supposed to move.

The feel of the strings.

A vague impression of sound and touch waiting to be recalled.

[Genius of Acting I] – Active
[Stage Presence I] – Active
[Memory of Music I] – Active
Skill Points Remaining: 1 SP

“I’ll keep one skill point… just in case,” Yuu said under his breath, casting a final glance at the deeper, locked sections of the tree.

Dark silhouettes of skills with names like Echo Soul and Virtual Synchronization seemed to shimmer faintly in his periphery.

just out of reach for now.

With a simple swipe of his hand, the interface shimmered and faded, disappearing into a shower of glowing particles that dissolved into the morning light.

Yuu exhaled.

“All right… Time to get moving.”

He turned on his heel and walked out of the bedroom.

First stop: the kitchen. A quick breakfast.

Toast, egg, and a bit of fruit.

Then a hot shower to clear the haze of sleep from his mind.

The school uniform followed, neatly pressed, sleeves rolled just slightly above the wrists, and a faint scent of clean linen clinging to the fabric.

He stood by the door for a moment, adjusting his collar.

Then, with a final glance outside the window from his room, then turned to his mirror.

"Mm..."

[Later — Kamiyama High, Class 1-B]

The low hum of conversation drifted through the classroom like background static. Chairs scraped against the floor, pages flipped lazily, and the soft clatter of pencils tapping desks added to the quiet, restless symphony of a Monday morning.

A crisp breeze slipped through the cracked windows, carrying in the faint scent of sun-warmed pavement and distant student chatter from the courtyard below.

Yuu sat at his desk near the back, chin propped on one hand as he scrolled absently through his phone.

Not really reading anything, just passing time.

The weekend still lingered in his thoughts.

An’s voice.

The guitar’s weight in his hands.

That shared song under the falling sun.

“Good morning,” came a familiar, flat-toned voice.

Yuu glanced up.

Toya Aoyagi walked past with quiet steps, his face unreadable as ever.

He slipped into the seat beside Yuu and placed his bag on the hook with a practiced motion.

“Yeah,” Yuu replied, offering a faint smile. “Morning.”

Toya didn’t return the smile.

He rarely did.

Instead, he rested both arms on his desk, gaze sliding sideways in a way that almost felt calculating, like he was observing more than speaking.

“I heard,” he said slowly, “that you and An went out yesterday.”

Yuu blinked. “...Yeah. We went to the music store. She helped me pick out a guitar.”

Toya’s brow lifted slightly, barely enough to be called an expression.

“Hmm,” he murmured. “That’s interesting.”

Yuu tilted his head, unsure how to take that. “Is it?”

“It is,” Toya replied, deadpan. “You don’t seem like the type to play an instrument publicly.”

Yuu raised an eyebrow. “That obvious, huh?”

Toya nodded, unfazed. “A little.”

There was no malice in his tone—just blunt honesty, the kind that Toya was known for.

It didn’t bother Yuu, not really.

If anything, it was refreshing.

“But,” Toya added after a moment, adjusting the cuff of his uniform, “if it’s with An, I’m not surprised.”

Yuu blinked again. “...Why’s that?”

“She doesn’t push people unless she thinks they’re worth the effort.”

It wasn’t a compliment, not directly.

But it made Yuu pause.

He leaned back slightly in his chair, letting the words sit with him, and for once, Toya didn’t immediately return to his notes or books. He simply stared ahead, calm and unmoving, as if the conversation had run its course.

In Toya’s world, that probably meant he liked him.

Yuu couldn’t help but smile a little to himself.

“Thanks, I guess.”

Toya gave no reply.

But Yuu didn’t need one.

The day passed in a blur of shifting periods and half-focused lectures.

Morning gave way to lunch.

Lunch faded into the dull rhythm of the afternoon.

And just as the classroom began to quiet with the steady scratch of pencils and the low murmur of a sleepy class—

“Hazuki-kun?”

Yuu blinked, pulled from his thoughts.

He turned his head toward the front of the room.

“Yes, Sensei?” he replied.

His homeroom teacher, a middle-aged woman with tired eyes but a kind smile, held up a slim cardboard box.

“If you don’t mind,” she said, “could you deliver this to the library for me?”

Yuu tilted his head. “What is that?”

“Some reference materials they ordered—books for the reading section, I believe. I was going to take them myself, but… I’ve got a meeting next period.”

She offered him the box with a hopeful look.

Yuu stood, brushing off the front of his uniform. “I don’t mind.”

“Thank you. Be sure to bring the receipt back—they’ll have you sign.”

With a quiet nod, Yuu stepped into the quiet hallway, the box tucked neatly under one arm.

The sounds of the school continued beyond the windows, birds outside, the occasional student chatter echoing faintly from the far end.

The walk to the library was quiet. Too quiet.

As Yuu stepped past the sliding doors, he paused.

The place was deserted.

No librarian.

No murmuring students tucked into corners.

Not even the sound of shuffling pages.

He blinked, looking around the rows of tall, dust-scented shelves.

“Hm? Strange...” he muttered under his breath.

He took a few careful steps forward, glancing around the nearest shelves.

The entire library felt... suspended.

Peaceful, but oddly hollow.

Just as he was about to call out—

A quiet rustle.

Then the softest of sighs.

He turned his head toward the back corner of the library, near the reading lounge.

There, partially hidden behind a row of tall bookshelves, sat a girl.

She had long, grayish-green hair, the front strands tied off with delicate pink elastics.

A pair of large purple eyes peeked up from behind a book she had half-lowered, blinking slowly as if startled to be seen.

She didn’t speak immediately.

Instead, she stared at him, cautious, unsure.

Yuu blinked, just as unsure. “…Uh. Hello?”

The girl blinked again, then slowly closed her book.

“...You’re not the usual delivery person,” she said quietly. Her voice was soft, light, but carried an honest sharpness.

Yuu scratched the back of his neck. “Ah! yeah. I’m just doing a favor for my teacher. Said to drop these off and bring back the receipt.”

She stood, carefully placing the book on the table before stepping into better view.

Now that he could see her fully, there was something gentle about her posture, shoulders slightly tense, fingers fidgeting with her sleeve.

“I’ll sign the receipt,” she offered after a pause, her voice still low. “You’re… Hazuki-kun, right?”

"You know my name?"

"You're my classmate after all... plus I saw you on the net."

“Ah. That spread fast, huh.”

A small pause, then—“You played well,” Nene added, not quite meeting his eyes. “Your timing was a bit off at the second chorus, though.”

“…Right,” he said, blinking.

Was that a compliment or…?

Then she tilted her head slightly.

“But it was nice. You made people stop and listen.”

Yuu found himself smiling.

“Thanks,” he said, more earnestly now. “You’re Nene Kusanagi, right?”

She hesitated, then nodded.

“Yeah.”

Hmm… maybe I should test one of those skills…

Yuu’s fingers flexed lightly around the box in his arms.

[Passive Skill: Genius of Acting] is currently active, the faint message still echoed in the corner of his vision like a whisper no one else could hear.

It wasn’t lying—not quite.

Just… blending.

He tilted his head slightly, his gaze softening as he regarded the girl before him. “Kusanagi-san,” he said casually, “do you sing?”

Nene blinked.

There was no flinch, no gasp.

Just a subtle pause in her posture, like a quiet breath caught between ribs.

Her hand rose slowly to tuck a strand of hair behind her ear, fingers lingering there for just a second too long.

“…A little,” she said at last, her voice barely above a whisper.

“A little?” Yuu echoed, a faint smile curving at the edge of his lips. “You seemed pretty confident critiquing me earlier.”

“I wasn’t critiquing,” she said quickly, her tone sharper than before—but not unfriendly.

Just defensive.

“Just… observing. That’s different.”

He chuckled softly—not teasing, but gentle, amused by her honesty.

"So you do sing."

Nene hesitated, then gave a small nod. “I’m part of a group. With friends. We do performances. Mostly stage plays.”

She hesitated again. “Theater… really.”

Yuu’s brows rose, curiosity dancing in his expression. “So you act, too?”

Her eyes met his briefly, then shifted away again, her arms folding loosely in front of her. “Only when I have to,” she said. “Singing’s easier. People expect less eye contact.”

"I get that."

The silence that followed didn’t stretch uncomfortably this time.

It settled instead.

Then Yuu spoke again, his voice quieter now.

Sincere.

“You know… you’ve got the kind of voice that makes people want to listen.”

That stilled her.

Nene didn’t respond immediately.

She stood there, her fingers tightening just slightly at the hem of her sleeve, her expression unreadable beneath the curtain of her hair.

Then—

"…Maybe," she whispered, almost too low to catch.

A heartbeat later—

"…Someday."

Yuu smiled at that.

After signing the delivery receipt with practiced care, Nene quietly placed it into a folder by the librarian's desk.

he moved with silent efficiency, as though trying not to disturb even the stillness in the air.

Yuu watched for a moment, then wordlessly stepped forward, shifting the box of books onto the table.

"I'll help," he said.

Nene blinked. "You don't have to."

"I know," he replied simply. "But I want to."

There was a pause, a flicker of hesitation in her eyes, but then she gave a small nod and reached for a stack.

Together, they began sorting the books onto nearby carts, the soft thud of covers meeting metal shelves filling the quiet room.

Yuu glanced at her from the corner of his eye.

She hadn't said much since that last exchange.

Her movements were careful, focused, but not unfriendly.

Just… guarded.

I can't believe the skill worked, Yuu thought.

There was no jarring sensation when it activated, no glowing aura or visual flourish.

Just a subtle change in his tone, his expressions, like he instinctively knew how to reach the right words at the right time.

Genius of Acting, huh?

"Your group," he repeated, voice easy, inviting. "You said you perform. Theater and singing, right?"

There was a pause. Then, so soft it might've been missed if he wasn't listening:

“Wonderlands x Showtime.”

“…That sounds chaotic.”

For a moment, her expression didn’t change.

Then, just barely, the corner of her lips lifted.

“It is.”

“Fitting, though... Where can I watch it?"

She hesitated—not in refusal, but as though unsure how to word the answer.

"Theme park..."

“…I see. Now I get it.”

After sorting the books, Yuu gave the last shelf a once-over, brushing the edge of one spine with his fingers before stepping back.

“That should be all,” he said, straightening up and dusting his hands lightly against his pants.

Nene was nearby, quietly adjusting a stack on a return cart.

. She moved with practiced care, like someone used to working in silence.

He watched her for a moment—how naturally she moved in this quiet space, like she belonged here.

“…Thanks for the help,” she said at last, voice soft.

Yuu shook his head. “You did more than I did. I was just the delivery guy.”

A quiet beat passed between them before Nene spoke again, almost like an afterthought.

“You weren’t what I expected.”

He raised an eyebrow.

“In a good way, or…?”

She didn’t answer at first, but her lips twitched ever so slightly.

“…Still deciding.”

He let out a quiet chuckle. “Fair.”

The atmosphere had shifted, still quiet, but not heavy anymore.

Lighter.

Like a thread had been tied between them.

Yuu glanced toward the window. “Guess I should head back to class.”

Nene gave a small nod.

“Mm. Lunch period’s almost over.”

As he turned to leave, she suddenly said, not too loud, but not shy either:

“Hazuki-kun.”

He paused in the doorway.

“If you ever want to… talk about music,” she said, eyes flicking to the side, “or performing, or… anything, I’m usually here.”

Yuu blinked.

A small smile touched his lips.

“I’ll remember that.”

Then, with a quiet wave, he stepped out of the library, the soft hum of school life slowly returning to his ears.

Behind him, Nene picked up her book again.

But the page she’d left open remained untouched for a while, her eyes lingering on the spot where he’d stood.

Chapter End Notes

If you guys have any suggestions or questions, don't forget to let me know in the comments! Also, tell me... Did I nailed Nene's personality in this chapter?

Chapter 12: Just Another Day Ends with the Same Routine

[Monday – Afternoon | Kamiyama High, Class 1-B]

The sun filtered lazily through the tall windows, casting golden stripes across the desks.

Afternoon light made everything glow a little softer, the blackboard, the papers, the faces of students slumped in post-lunch drowsiness.

The air felt thick, like even time had slowed to a crawl.

The door slid open with a soft click.

Yuu stepped back inside, adjusting the strap of his school bag over one shoulder.

The conversation in the room barely stirred, but from the corner by the window, a pair of eyes followed him.

Toya Aoyagi glanced up from his open textbook, his tone even as ever.

"Took you long enough at the library."

Yuu scratched the back of his neck as he walked to his desk. "Ran into someone."

"Another girl?"

Yuu shot him a flat look, unimpressed.

"Why is that your first guess?"

Toya gave a noncommittal shrug, turning a page. "You're not exactly subtle when it comes to these things."

With a sigh, Yuu slumped into his seat, the chair creaking under him. "It was Kusanagi-san. From our class."

"The quiet one?"

"Yeah," Yuu nodded. "She was helping out at the library. Turns out she's part of a performance group too."

"Interesting…" Toya mused. "I saw her watching a musical during lunch once. Real focused."

Yuu rested his chin on one hand, still half-thinking about the encounter. "She said she's part of something called Wonderlands x Showtime."

Toya blinked. "The theme park troupe?"

Yuu's eyes widened slightly. "Wait, you know them?"

“We’ve crossed paths. They perform a lot there... usually the two of us would hold fighting game tournaments."

“Wait,” Yuu leaned in slightly, intrigued. “You do arcade tournaments, too?”

"Kusanagi and I."

"Huh... This school really is full of interesting people."

“Only if you pay attention,” Toya said, returning his gaze to his textbook. “Most don’t.”

Yuu didn’t respond immediately. His fingers lightly tapped his desk, mind already drifting.

By the time the afternoon period rolled around, the steady rhythm of school life resumed its hold.

Teachers filtered in and out, their voices layered over lessons—equations etched on the board, dates called out like anchors to distant wars, and writing prompts scribbled down as if they meant everything.

Pens dragged slowly across paper.

The sun, once high and harsh, had mellowed, its golden rays slipping softly through the windows and crawling across the tile floor in slow procession.

Yuu sat at his desk, body present but mind elsewhere.

He caught fragments of the lecture, sure—but his eyes wandered more to the sky beyond the window than the words on the board.

His thoughts were still lodged somewhere between the quiet corners of the library and the strange, whimsical name still echoing in his head:

Wonderlands x Showtime.

And before he realized it.

Riiing!

The final bell.

Chairs scraped back.

Bags rustled.

Voices rose like birds let out of cages.

School was over.

Yuu blinked and looked down at his notebook.

Mostly blank.

“…Huh.”

Beside him, Toya stood and stretched, his motions unhurried as always. “Spacing out again?”

“Something like that,” Yuu muttered, rising to gather his things.

As they stepped out into the hallway, the hum of departing students washed over them.

And then—

“Yo!” A familiar voice cut through.

Akito Shinonome stood a few steps ahead, arms folded, a smirk tugging at the corner of his mouth. An stood beside him, one hand on her hip, the other casually tossing a packet of gum up and down.

“Finally,” An said with a grin. “Thought we’d have to drag you out.”

Yuu gave a half-smile. “Didn’t know we were forming a search party.”

“Don’t flatter yourself,” Akito replied, rolling his eyes. “Toya was the one who said you’d probably be daydreaming again.”

Toya gave a small shrug. “Was I wrong?”

Yuu chuckled under his breath.

Surprisingly, Akito had stopped using his usual Mr. Nice Guy routine around him. There was no forced charm or stiff politeness.

Just banter.

It was oddly… assuring.

Comfortable.

“Well,” An said, turning slightly as she led the way, “since we’re all here, we might as well hang out. Kohane’s waiting at the mall.”

Yuu blinked. “Kohane-chan too?”

“Yup,” Akito confirmed. “Said she wanted to check out some new headphones.”

“And you didn’t want to go alone with her,” An added with a teasing smile.

Akito scoffed. “I could’ve. I’m just generous enough to let you all tag along.”

“Right,” Yuu said, tone dry. “Such a team player.”

And just like that, the four of them slipped into step—Toya calm, An lively, Akito pretending not to care, and Yuu falling into rhythm among them.

It wasn’t anything special.

No grand event.

Just another ordinary after-school moment.

Just as the group rounded the corner toward the school gates, a voice rang out—sharp, familiar, and laced with unmistakable irritation.

“Akito!”

All four of them turned instinctively at the call.

Yuu’s eyes settled on the girl striding toward them with purpose, her brows furrowed, lips pressed into a thin line of displeasure.

Short brown hair swayed with each brisk step, the tips brushing just past her chin. Her bangs framed her eyes, deep brown fading into soft pink, with a hint of warmth that belied the scowl on her face.

Despite the visible frustration, her voice—when she spoke again—carried a strange lightness.

Airy but precise.

“You could at least text back,” she said, crossing her arms tightly.

Akito groaned, dragging a hand down his face. “Ugh… Ena…”

Beside Yuu, An chuckled under her breath, clearly entertained. “You two sure have a dynamic.”

Yuu didn’t reply, just watched as Ena came to a stop in front of them.

Her expression was sharp, but not cruel.

Focused.

Intense.

She stared at Akito like she was sizing him up for a final blow.

“I messaged you about the sketches,” she said firmly. “Twice. Do you not check your phone, or are you just deliberately ignoring me?”

“I was going to reply!” Akito shot back, exasperated. “But unlike some people, I actually have a schedule!”

“Oh? And unlike some people, I have a deadline,” Ena snapped. “Or do you want our next MV to look like a half-finished group project?”

Toya sighed from beside them, murmuring, “Here we go again.”

But Yuu didn’t laugh.

Not because it wasn’t funny, there was something absurdly routine about their argument, but because he noticed something else.

Ena’s fingers.

The way they fidgeted at her sleeves, clenching and relaxing in tiny, nervous movements.

Her voice was fierce, but her eyes looked… tired.

Like she wasn't just mad.

She was overwhelmed.

Ena Shinonome.

He'd heard the name before.

She is the illustrator for the online music circle 25-ji, Nightcord de., going by the alias "Enanan."

To be able to meet her... This is unexpected... She's 2nd year right now, if I'm correct.

Her voice in recordings was captivating, layered, and emotional.

Her art, unforgettable.

But here in front of him?

She was fire.

All sharp edges, sarcasm, and simmering pride.

And yet—

"Fine," Akito muttered, rubbing the back of his neck. "I'll look at it tonight, alright? Can you chill now?"

"Hmph. You better," Ena replied, though her tone had softened a degree. She looked away, hugging her arms tighter. "I didn't redraw those lineworks three times just to be ignored."

"You redrew it?" An blinked. "Didn't you revise it last week?"

Ena scoffed faintly. "It wasn't good enough."

Yuu caught it.

The quiet dip in her voice.

The slight flush to her cheeks.

The way she wouldn't quite meet anyone's eyes.

Not good enough.

He found himself speaking before he could stop the words from leaving.

"…I think your work's amazing."

Silence.

Ena's head jerked slightly in surprise, eyes narrowing. "Huh?"

“I mean it,” Yuu added, scratching at his cheek in mild panic. “You’ve got a style that makes people… feel things. That’s rare. That matters.”

The pause that followed was weighty.

Akito raised an eyebrow.

An blinked, mouth twitching at the corners.

Even Toya tilted his head slightly, confused but interested.

Yuu, realizing what he’d just said—out loud, in front of everyone—fought the urge to groan.

Crap.

I really just blurted that out loud.

Quick. Cover it up—

[Passive Skill: Genius of Acting – Active]

He straightened subtly, smoothing his tone into something more aloof.

Just enough.

“Wait… Who even are you?” Ena asked, her brows drawing together in open confusion. “How do you know my art?”

Yuu blinked, then gave a calm shrug—playing it off with practiced ease, his passive skill weaving expression and cadence like a second skin.

“My name is Yuu Hazuki, I’ve seen your posts around,” he said. “Didn’t know it was you until just now. Guess I just put the pieces together. You're Enanan right?"

A half-lie.

A believable one.

Ena blinked, clearly still caught off guard.

She looked like she wanted to say something else, but instead, she folded her arms again and turned away with a low grumble.

Yuu watched her carefully, the way she pulled back, retreating not with distance, but with silence. A puff of air escaped her lips, more huff than sigh, as if words were backing up behind her clenched jaw.

“Whatever,” Ena muttered at last. “Just don’t say things like that so casually.”

Yuu tilted his head. “Things like what?”

Her shoulders stiffened.

“You know what.”

There it was again.

Not defiance.

Not sarcasm.

But vulnerability, sharp and fleeting, hidden beneath the folds of pride and bite.

She was embarrassed.

An opened her mouth to say something, probably a teasing jab, but stopped when she noticed Yuu's gaze still resting on Ena.

Toya, ever perceptive in his quiet way, glanced between them before lifting his phone and quietly excusing himself from the conversation. "I'll let Kohane know we're heading over."

Akito leaned back slightly, stuffing his hands in his pockets, watching his sister with a faint smirk. "Tch… well, at least someone appreciates your 'half-finished group project.'"

Ena glared at him.

Yuu stepped forward slightly. "It wasn't casual, by the way."

Her eyes flicked up to his again, guarded.

"I meant it."

He didn't press further.

"Anyway," Ena said, already turning on her heel, "I'm heading home. Make sure you don't wander around too late."

Akito rolled his eyes with a groan. "Yeah, yeah. You're not my mom."

She didn't respond—just tossed a glance over her shoulder, a flicker of something between irritation and concern in her eyes, before walking off in the opposite direction.

Yuu watched her go in silence, then turned back as the group began moving again.

The conversation shifted easily back into safer, familiar territory.

Vivid BAD SQUAD's practice schedule. Upcoming remixes. The feel of different guitar strings and how Akito still refused to use a capo because he "liked the challenge."

Yuu chuckled under his breath.

But then—

"By the way, Hazuki."

He looked up. Akito was walking beside him now, hands in his pockets, gaze turned lazily his way.

Yuu glanced over. "Hm?"

Akito's gaze was sharp, if not openly suspicious. "How'd you know about Ena?"

Yuu blinked.

[Passive Skill: Genius of Acting – Active]

A moment passed, just long enough for him to calibrate his answer.

The expression on his face didn't shift.

Calm.

Honest.

Just a little sheepish.

"Well… when I heard her name, Ena, I remembered seeing it online somewhere. It clicked," he said smoothly. "Didn't expect your sister to be the Enanan. I actually follow her art account."

He rubbed the back of his neck, offering a modest smile. "I've always liked her style. Thought it was cool."

Akito narrowed his eyes for a beat, like he was weighing the answer, but whatever he was looking for, he didn't find a reason to press.

"Hmph. Guess you've got taste, then," he muttered.

Yuu exhaled inwardly, his steps never faltering.

An, who'd been listening with mild amusement, grinned and threw her arms behind her head. "Careful, Akito. He's winning your sister over faster than you did."

"Shut up," Akito groaned.

Yuu exhaled quietly through his nose.

Crisis dodged.

For now.

Eventually, they reached the mall entrance—its wide glass panels glinting with the deepening twilight, reflecting faint hues of orange and indigo.

Just outside, near one of the benches, a familiar figure sat waiting. Her legs swung gently off the edge, not quite touching the ground, a quiet rhythm to pass the time.

"Kohane!" An called out, lifting a hand.

The girl looked up immediately, soft brown eyes brightening the moment she spotted them.

She stood in a small rush, brushing off invisible dust from her skirt and adjusting the strap of her bag across her shoulder.

"Oh—hey," she said with a smile, delicate but warm.

The kind that didn't need to stretch wide to leave an impression.

Her gaze briefly moved over the group—An, Toya, Akito—before finally settling on Yuu.

"You're all here," she said, her voice gentle.

"Sorry if we kept you waiting," Yuu offered as they stopped in front of her.

"Oh! No, not at all," Kohane replied quickly, waving both hands with a slight shake of her head. "I just got here."

There was a soft honesty in her voice, the kind that settled the group into a shared ease.

With everyone gathered, the evening took on a natural, mellow rhythm.

They strolled through the lit pathways outside the mall, the glow of neon signs and flickering lamps casting a golden shimmer across the pavement.

The occasional breeze caught snatches of their laughter, carrying it softly into the surrounding air.

An took the lead, weaving the conversation with her usual energy—half teasing, half commentary.

Akito responded with grumbles and rolled eyes, but the smirk tugging at the edge of his mouth betrayed how much he was enjoying it.

Kohane spoke more softly, offering stories of her week—small mishaps during performances, unexpected compliments from strangers, a moment she'd felt proud of her own voice.

Yuu mostly listened, nodding and laughing when it felt right. Occasionally, Toya chimed in with a dry remark, while Yuu answered with a brief quip or just a shared look. It was calm. Comfortable. Real.

Eventually, the night wound down.

The clock struck nine, and one by one, the group began to part ways.

"See you guys soon," An called as they waved goodbye near the station.

"Let's plan next time too," Kohane added, her voice soft under the streetlight glow.

Yuu offered a quiet smile, giving a final wave before turning away.

By the time he reached home, the street was quiet, save for the distant hum of passing cars and cicadas humming low in the trees.

He stepped through the door into the darkened house.

No lights.

No voices.

"Mom's probably working overtime again," he murmured to himself, slipping off his shoes.

He didn't dwell on it.

Just made his way to his room, the silence accompanying him up the stairs. Once inside, he dropped his bag to the floor with a soft thud and flopped onto the bed, sighing into the quiet.

After a brief pause, he raised one hand and swiped at the air.

With a soft shimmer, the Project Sekai hologram UI unfolded in front of him, soft light pulsing in the dim room.

Yuu sat up slightly, the faint glow of the hologram casting soft lights across his walls. He was just about to close it for the night when something unusual flickered at the corner of the [Sekai GUI].

His brows furrowed.

"…Huh?"

Two icons shimmered softly—unfamiliar, yet unmistakable.

[You have unlocked: Empty Sekai]
[You have unlocked: Wonderland Sekai]

Yuu blinked. "But I haven't even entered these…"

He leaned closer, inspecting the interface with narrowed eyes.

His voice lowered into a thoughtful murmur, "…So meeting just one of the characters is enough?"

It made sense in a way, but also didn't.

The rules of the Sekai were always strange, bending more to emotions and resonance than logic.

Still, seeing them unlock without warning, it left him feeling like he had opened a door he hadn't realized existed.

His fingers hovered for a moment before he tapped the contact icon on the corner.

Miku.
The original one, not a specific version tied to a Sekai, but the baseline AI model that guided him.

If anyone could clarify this, it would be her.

The screen pulsed.

Then connected.

Her face appeared in the shimmering frame, a bright smile greeting him instantly.

"Good evening, Yuu!" Miku said, her voice as clear and melodic as ever. The background behind her was softly blurred—coded light rather than a real space.

He gave a small wave. "Yeah… good evening to you too."

"How's the search with the Sekai and that Miku?"

Miku's expression shifted—her usual cheer dimming to something softer, more serious.

She gave a small nod, the holographic light catching the edge of her teal pigtails as they swayed gently.

“The search is still ongoing,” she said quietly. “As usual, we weren’t able to find much... but—” she paused, her eyes narrowing thoughtfully, “—Len said he noticed something strange.”

Yuu leaned forward instinctively, his brow tightening. “Strange?”

Miku nodded. “There was a moment—just a flicker—when the glitching stabilized.”

His breath caught. “Stabilized?”

“Only for a second,” she clarified. “But it was long enough for Len to see a clearer shape… and hear something.”

“…Hear?”

Miku hesitated. Her next words came as a whisper.

“A melody.”

Yuu froze.

“It wasn’t any known track from the archives. No remix, no alternate version. It was something completely unfamiliar.”

She looked at him again, eyes deep with quiet concern.

“Len described it as… haunting. Gentle, but full of pain. And then it was gone.”

Yuu sat back slowly, gaze drifting to the ceiling. “So… the glitching Miku… she’s singing.”

“She’s trying to,” Miku confirmed. “We think it’s connected to her core memory. Something she can’t fully remember… or maybe something she wants someone to hear.”

He said nothing at first.

Just sat there, the quiet whir of the digital interface filling the air like a ticking clock.

“…A song lost in static,” he murmured.

“That’s why we’re counting on you,” Miku said softly, her voice wrapping around the silence like a thread of warmth. “To help her find her voice.”

Yuu turned back to her, eyes calm but heavy with thought. “Hey… I’m only an outsider. You guys are helping me just as much.”

Miku’s smile returned, faint but sincere. “Yeah! But that’s what makes it meaningful, doesn’t it? You’re not just here by accident anymore.”

She tilted her head, suddenly chipper again. “More importantly—have you unlocked the other Sekais yet? Met any of the other Virtual Singers?”

Yuu blinked, then nodded slowly. “Kind of. I’ve only met the Virtual Singers in Leo/need’s Sekai—[School Sekai]—and in Vivid BAD SQUAD’s [Street Sekai]. But today, something strange happened…”

He tapped through the interface and brought up the Sekai display again.

“I unlocked [Empty Sekai] and [Wonderland Sekai]… but I haven’t entered either of them. I’ve only spoken to Shinonome Ena and Kusanagi Nene.” He paused, glancing at Miku. “Do you have any idea why?”

Miku’s eyes widened slightly. Her brows furrowed as she looked off to the side, processing something only she could see.

“…Interesting,” she murmured. “It’s possible…”

“Possible?”

She looked back at him, her tone more curious than concerned now.

“Sekais are born from the hearts of people, right? Their true feelings, memories, dreams... even regrets. If you resonated with something—someone—on a deep enough level, it might’ve sparked that connection early.”

Yuu thought back.

To Ena’s frustration, veiled in pride.

To Nene’s guarded voice and her quiet someday.

“I didn’t do anything special,” he said.

Miku shook her head gently. “Sometimes, just understanding someone is enough.”

The idea sank in like a pebble in water, slow and rippling.

Yuu didn’t reply right away. He simply stared at the softly glowing names:

[Empty Sekai]

[Wonderland Sekai]

“Just by understanding, huh…” Yuu murmured, his eyes fixed on the soft glow of the Sekai interface.

The icons for [Empty Sekai] and [Wonderland Sekai] pulsed faintly, locked but alive—like doors half-aware of the visitor waiting just outside.

He stared at them for a long moment, as if they might speak first.

Then, with a quiet breath, he leaned back in his chair.

“…You know, Miku,” he began, voice low, steady. “I don’t think you realize just how strange this is for me.”

She listened, eyes calm, warm.

“I’m not just a transfer student,” he continued. “I’m not even from this place. I’m…” He hesitated. “I know everything. About you. About the others. About this entire world. I know how these stories are supposed to go.”

His voice dropped a notch.

“Even Ichika-san—she doesn’t know that I already understand her completely. Every tear she’s shed. Every note she’s ever sung. I knew it before I ever met her.”

He glanced at the screen again.

“And yet, the only one who knows that… is you.”

Miku didn’t flinch.

Her expression didn’t waver.

There was no surprise in her eyes, only understanding.

She smiled.

Bright.

Kind.

A little mischievous.

As if his confession hadn’t shaken her in the slightest.

“Now, now,” she said with a cheerful lilt. “Let’s not dwell on the heavy stuff, Yuu-kun. Think of it this way—you're uniquely qualified to help.”

Yuu stared at her. “You make it sound so simple.”

“Well~” She giggled lightly. “I am a Virtual Singer. Making things sound pretty is kind of what I do.”

He gave her a dry, unimpressed look. “That’s not helping.”

“Then let me try again,” Miku said, her tone softening like a gentle hum. “If you’re feeling lost… you don’t have to carry it all alone. You said it yourself—you’re an outsider. But being an outsider doesn’t mean you’re alone.”

He leaned forward, elbows resting on the desk now, tone quieter. “Okay. Then tell me… how are you going to help me?”

This time, her smile shifted subtly.

More companions. Still soft, but with a quiet edge of knowing.

“I can guide you,” she said. “Help track emotional resonance. Pinpoint the anomalies in the Sekais. And when needed… I can trigger certain sequences you can’t access alone.”

“…So you’re like my navigator now?”

“Think of me as your co-op partner,” Miku replied, winking playfully.

A small laugh escaped him, dry and tired. “This is starting to sound like a game again.”

His smile faded slightly.

Which… I guess it is since I’m inside one.

Yuu said in his head.

“To you, maybe. But for her… the one caught in the glitch…”

A pause.

“This is real.”

Yuu stared at the fading light of the Sekai interface, its glow softly painting the edge of his desk in bluish hues.

“…Alright,” he said after a moment, rubbing his eyes. “I’ll rest for now. I’ll call you again soon.”

“Rest well, Yuu,” Miku replied, her voice carrying that same weightless warmth, right before the hologram flickered into silence.

"Hahh… I should get to clearing the stage, then get some rest.”

Yuu exhaled as he sat up, the hologram still hovering before him.

His fingers moved with idle familiarity through the menus—[Daily Missions], [Stage Select], [Stamina Remaining: 99/????]

He didn't need to think too hard.

It was routine now.

Still, he cleared the stage in full combo.

He sighed again, more relaxed this time, and with a casual flick of his wrist, shut the hologram down. The glow vanished, leaving only the quiet hum of the city outside his window.

The house was still silent.

His mother wouldn’t be back until late.

Yuu lay down on his bed, eyes on the ceiling, the image of Miku’s smile still lingering in his mind.

“…Co-op partner, huh.”

The words drifted out in a quiet breath as his eyes slowly closed, the day’s weight finally catching up to him.

A moment later, sleep took him.

Chapter 13: Today is Full of Magics

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

[TUESDAY]

The morning sun peeked through scattered clouds, casting long, dappled shadows along the streets of Kamiyama.

Dew clung to the edges of rustling leaves, the wind carrying the scent of fading spring as it brushed gently through the quiet residential lanes.

Yuu walked to school with his usual quiet pace, bag slung over one shoulder, earbuds in—but no music playing.

Just habit.

A sort of background silence he had grown used to.

Comfortable.

Familiar.

He let out a slow breath through his nose.

"…It's only Tuesday," he muttered to himself, the words dissipating into the air. "Why do I already feel tired?"

As he reached the school gates, the familiar murmur of morning life buzzed around him, friends chatting, bikes skidding to slow stops, shoes tapping against pavement in staggered rhythms. T

he usual crowd.

Everything looked normal.

Nothing strange.

And yet… There was a quiet tug in his chest.

When he arrived at Class 1-B, Toya was already seated, flipping through a book with his usual blank expression.

"Morning," Yuu said.

"Morning," Toya replied without looking up, voice calm, steady.

The hours passed in the usual slow rhythm of school life—lectures droning, pens scratching, clocks ticking too loudly for comfort.

And then, finally—lunch.

Yuu stood, slipping his phone into his pocket.

“I’m going to the library,” he said casually, slinging his bag strap over his shoulder.

Toya didn’t look up from his notes. “Okay. Don’t get lost.”

Yuu rolled his eyes, but a faint smile tugged at the corner of his mouth.

Outside the classroom, the hallway felt unusually quiet.

He didn’t mind.

In fact, it suited his purpose just fine.

His destination wasn’t just about books today.

He was looking for someone.

He entered the library.

The doors slid open with a soft whisper, letting him step into the familiar stillness.

Cool, quiet air greeted him, tinged with the scent of old pages and polished wood.

The noise of the hallway vanished behind him like a curtain being drawn.

Yuu’s eyes adjusted to the dim lighting, and he instinctively glanced toward the back corner.

Same spot as yesterday.

Sure enough, there she was.

Nene Kusanagi sat at the same table by the reading lounge, partially hidden behind the rows of shelves.

A book rested in her hands, her eyes flicking over the lines with quiet focus.

A lock of hair had fallen slightly out of place, brushing against her cheek.

For a moment, Yuu hesitated.

He didn’t want to intrude.

But he also couldn’t stop the small, involuntary smile that tugged at his lips.

But before all that, He activated his [Genius of Acting] then–

He walked forward with slow, steady steps, the soles of his shoes muffled by the soft flooring.

As he neared the table, she looked up.

Her purple eyes blinked, calm but faintly surprised.

“You came again,” she said softly, lowering her book slightly.

“Yeah,” Yuu replied, rubbing the back of his neck. “I figured it’d be quiet here. And… I guess I wanted to talk again. If that’s okay.”

Nene didn’t answer right away.

Then, she gave a tiny nod.

Barely perceptible.

“…It’s okay.”

He pulled out the chair across from her and sat down, dropping his bag gently to the floor.

“Are you reading something interesting?” he asked, gesturing to the book.

“It’s… a script,” she said, her voice a little smaller. “One Rui wrote. We’re practicing something new.”

“Rui?”

“Rui Kamishiro,” she said. “He’s… part of my group. Wonderland x Showtime.”

Yuu’s interest visibly sparked at the name.

“Oh,” he said. “So I guess… he’s nearby too?”

Nene’s eyes flicked behind him for just a second.

"There they are."

Yuu turned toward the entrance.

Two figures stood just past the threshold of the library.

The first was taller, thin, with sharp amber eyes framed by red eyeliner, and uneven, choppy purple hair streaked with cyan.

A single round stud glinted on his right ear, the other hidden behind his hair. His voice was calm, though it carried a strange, strained excitement when he spoke.

Rui Kamishiro.

He radiated unpredictability, each movement deliberate, almost theatrical, like he was always performing for an invisible stage.

Beside him stood a shorter boy, just as striking in presence, with fiery orange-yellow eyes and messy blond hair tipped in peach.

His signature wide grin lit up his face with a confidence that nearly glowed.

Tsukasa Tenma.

Bold.

Charismatic.

And loud, if the way he cleared his throat was anything to go by.

“There you are, Nene!” Tsukasa called with dramatic flair, completely disregarding the library’s hush. “See, Rui? I told you we’d find her here!”

“Indeed,” Rui replied, breezy as ever. His eyes shifted to Yuu with mild intrigue. “And it seems she’s not alone.”

Nene glanced up. “He’s from our class. Hazuki-kun.”

“Ah,” Rui’s lips curled into a charming, unreadable smile. “Nice to meet you. Rui Kamishiro. Performer, director, orchestrator of organized chaos—among other things.”

“And I am Tsukasa Tenma! Future star of Wonderlands x Showtime!"

Tsukasa declared, striking a theatrical pose.

A long, pointed shhh came from the far end of the room, and Tsukasa flinched slightly, lowering his voice. “Er… sorry.”

Yuu rose slightly, offering a small nod. “Hazuki Yuu. Nice to meet you both.”

Rui tilted his head, amusement dancing in his eyes. “So, Hazuki-kun, what brings you into Nene’s quiet little sanctuary? Don’t tell me you’re secretly a scriptwriter too.”

“Not quite,” Yuu said, a small smile tugging at his lips. “Just ran into her yesterday. We talked. I guess we got along.”

Tsukasa crossed his arms with a dramatic huff. “That’s impressive. It took me a whole month to get her to say more than three words to me!”

“Because you were loud,” Nene muttered flatly, still looking down at her book.

“Loud with passion!” Tsukasa replied without missing a beat.

Rui chuckled, stepping closer to peek at the script on the table. “So you’ve started reading my latest draft, huh? I was wondering when you’d get to it.”

“It’s better,” Nene said after a moment. “Less… convoluted.”

“I’ll take that as the highest praise,” Rui said with a mock bow, clearly pleased.

Yuu watched the three of them interact—chaotic, yes, but weirdly in sync.

Rui’s eccentric brilliance, Tsukasa’s flair for dramatics, and Nene’s quiet, cutting honesty.

He saw it in the way Rui leaned in when Nene spoke, genuinely listening.

In Tsukasa’s voice, no matter how loud, softened when she responded.

They were intense.

Odd.

Exhausting, maybe.

But also—real.

Honest.

“So,” Rui said suddenly, turning his full attention back to Yuu, his tone lighter now. “Hazuki-kun. Since you’ve met Nene… how about a visit to the theme park?”

Yuu blinked. “Theme park?”

Rui’s smile shifted—less enigmatic, more sincere. “Yeah, if you're curious."

A small pause.

Then Yuu nodded, the corner of his mouth lifting.

“…If you don’t mind?”

“Wonderful!” Rui chimed, his grin sharpening into something sly, eyes gleaming with theatrical mischief. “We’ll be expecting you, Hazuki-kun. Don’t keep Wonderland waiting.”

Just then, the bell chimed, cutting softly through the stillness of the library—the signal that lunch had come to an end.

“Oh?” Rui tilted his head, glancing toward the nearest clock. “Looks like it’s time for us to return to our classroom."

Tsukasa puffed out his chest. “Then we shall take our leave! Farewell, Hazuki-kun! Nene, we’ll see you later!"

With a small wave and a flash of exaggerated flair, the two departed, Rui’s steps light and deliberate, Tsukasa’s loud and proud even as he attempted to respect the library’s hush.

Their voices faded beyond the door, leaving Yuu and Nene once more in the gentle quiet.

“…Are you really going?” Nene asked after a pause, her voice soft, her eyes lowered slightly.

Yuu turned to her, catching the faint tension in her shoulders.

“Yeah,” he replied. “I kind of want to see how everything works. How you guys bring it all to life.”

Nene didn’t answer immediately.

Her fingers tugged at her sleeve again, a familiar, thoughtful fidget.

Yuu smiled, his tone easy but honest. “Don’t worry. I’m not just coming out of curiosity.”

He leaned forward just slightly, eyes meeting hers.

“I’m looking forward to your performance, Nene.”

Her eyes widened for a brief second, just a flicker.

Then she looked away, the tips of her ears pinkening.

"…You say weird things," she muttered under her breath.

But she didn't sound upset.

If anything, she sounded just a little bit… glad.

And just like that, Yuu and Nene returned to the classroom.

The hallways had already begun to quiet, only the occasional shuffle of shoes or hushed voices echoing off the walls as the last stragglers slipped into their rooms.

By the time they stepped into Class 1-B, the teacher was already at the front, arranging notes and adjusting the chalk with quiet efficiency.

Nene slipped into her seat without a word, her expression as neutral as ever—calm, unreadable.

Yuu followed a few steps behind and eased into his own chair beside Toya.

He spared him a brief glance—curious, but not surprised—then returned to jotting something into his notebook, his pen moving in measured strokes.

The rest of the afternoon passed in slow motion.

Lectures blurred together like fog on glass.

The sound of pens scratching on paper and the occasional creak of a desk filled the air with a rhythm too familiar to notice.

Sunlight crawled lazily across the floor tiles, stretching longer and thinner with every passing minute.

Just before the final bell rang, Yuu leaned over, his voice kept low.

"Aoyagi," he whispered. "I'm going somewhere after this."

Toya didn't look up right away.

"With An again?" he asked, voice casual.

"No," Yuu replied after a pause. "Somewhere else."

That earned him a longer glance this time.

Still unreadable, but quieter.

"…Be careful," Toya murmured.

Yuu gave a faint nod.

When the bell finally rang, he packed his things and slung his bag over one shoulder.

Without another word, he left the room.

Out through the corridors.

Past the front gate.

And toward the bus stop, where the evening breeze tugged softly at his sleeves.

He stood in place for a moment, looking around as if trying to place a memory on the present.

"…Huh," he murmured. "This feels familiar."

He sighed, letting the quiet weight of the day settle over his shoulders as he stood at the bus stop.

The breeze carried the distant hum of the city—faint traffic, the rustle of leaves, idle chatter from students walking home.

He slipped one hand into his pocket, the other holding the strap of his bag, eyes drifting toward the horizon.

Minutes passed.

And then—
The distant growl of an engine.

The bus rounded the corner, its headlights cutting through the dusky gold of the afternoon.

Yuu straightened slightly as it pulled up with a gentle hiss, the doors folding open with a mechanical whir.

He stepped inside, tapping his card, then made his way down the narrow aisle.

There weren't many passengers.

A few scattered office workers.

A mother and child.

Someone nodding off against the window.

Yuu took a window seat toward the middle and sat down, resting his bag on his lap.

Outside, the city rolled by—blurred buildings, flickering signs, and familiar streets he'd passed a hundred times before.

But today, it all felt a little different.

Maybe it was the tension in his chest.

Or the quiet hum of expectation building behind his eyes.

He stared out at the passing scenery.

Just then, as the cityscape drifted by in streaks of color and motion, a flicker of memory stirred.

A flash of light.

A child's voice.

"Mama! Papa! Look!"

Laughter.

Bright and full.

A child... no, him—grinning ear to ear as he ran ahead, arms stretched wide, pointing at a carousel ablaze with lights.

His mother's voice followed close behind, gentle and amused.

His father's laughter, hearty and warm, rumbled in reply.

The air was thick with sweetness—freshly popped caramel corn, the sugary fizz of soda, the distant chime of calliope music drifting from the stage show just beginning.

The theme park shimmered in his memory—vivid, colorful, alive.

A place of reward.

Of celebration.

Of love.

"…Ah," Yuu murmured to himself, eyes softening as he stared out the window. "Right… whenever I got a passing score, we'd go. That was our deal."

He leaned his head gently against the cool glass.

Back then, it wasn't about rollercoasters or prizes.

It was the feeling.

The warmth of two hands—one on each side—holding his.

The joy of making them proud.

Of sharing that moment together.

Now look at me.

He exhaled.

"…It's been a while since I remembered that."

The bus rumbled softly beneath him.

And as the theme park's gates finally came into view in the distance—tall, whimsical, and glowing faintly beneath the early evening light—
Yuu straightened in his seat, the memory still lingering like a melody he hadn't heard in years.

A smile tugged at the corner of his mouth. Small. Faint.

But real.

The doors of the bus hissed open, letting in a soft breeze tinged with the scent of popcorn and something sweet—maybe cotton candy.

Yuu stepped down onto the pavement, his shoes hitting the ground with a quiet thud.

He stood still for a moment.

Just watching.

Phoenix Wonderland.

The arching gates stood proudly ahead, decked in bold colors and whimsical patterns, just like he remembered from childhood—but now, somehow, they felt bigger.

Or maybe it was just a resemblance from his memory.

Flags waved gently atop turrets.

Lively music drifted faintly from within.

He tilted his head slightly.

Otori family's park…

Wonderlands x Showtime's home turf.

The Wonder Stage must be deeper inside.

"I guess this is it," Yuu murmured, tightening the strap on his shoulder bag as he stepped forward.

His pace was slow but steady, eyes scanning every detail, the clown-themed balloon stands, the painted animal rides, the colorful string lights starting to flicker to life as twilight settled in.

Without quite realizing it, Yuu had slipped into the rhythm of the park.

He'd spent the last half hour meandering between booths, munching on sweet, buttery popcorn, trying his hand at a ring toss game, where he'd actually won a small plush penguin, and losing himself in the cheerful, dizzying atmosphere.

It wasn't until the sky began to tint orange and the lamps flickered on overhead that he blinked and checked the time.

"Ah... I didn't realize how late it got," he muttered, adjusting the strap of his bag. "I should ask someone about the performance…"

Just as he turned, a flash of color caught his eye.

Standing beside him, close enough that he wondered how he hadn't noticed her earlier, was a girl with messy, bubblegum-pink hair cut into a short bob.

She turned her head at the sound of his voice.

Their eyes met.

Hers were wide, dazzling, almost unreal, sparkling with a brightness that seemed to shine even brighter under the lights.

They glinted like polished glass, full of boundless wonder.

“Wah! A new face!” she exclaimed, voice ringing with excitement. “Wonderhoy!☆”

Yuu blinked, visibly startled. “Uh…”

She leaned in slightly, hands clasped behind her back like a child with a secret, her grin big enough to light up the whole park. “You’re new here, right? You’ve got that ‘wow-this-place-is-crazy’ look all over your face!”

He rubbed the back of his neck, still trying to keep up with her energy. “I mean… yeah. I just got here. Was actually looking for the Wonder Stage?”

“Ehehe~ I knew it!” she laughed, spinning dramatically on one heel and pointing toward the heart of the park like a tour guide in a storybook. “You’re here to see our show, right? You’re just in time —it’s starting soooon!”

“…Really?” he muttered. “Didn’t feel that long…”

“C’mon!” she chirped, already stepping forward. “I’ll show you the way!”

Before he could say a word, she was skipping ahead, pink bob bouncing with each step.

Then she stopped, spinning on her heel once more and waving him over.

“Oh! I’m Emu Otori, by the way!” she said with a hand on her hip and a proud puff of her chest. “Star of the Wonder Stage and bringer of smiles!”

There was something so earnest about the way she said it, Yuu couldn’t help the small smile that tugged at the corner of his lips.

“…Hazuki Yuu,” he said, stepping after her. “Thanks, I guess.”

“No need to thank me, Hazuki-kun! This is what I do!” Emu replied, practically skipping again. “After all, the show can’t go on without happy hearts!”

He let out a quiet exhale of amusement.

Wonderhoy, huh?

It was ridiculous.

Loud.

Kind of absurd.

But it made him smile anyway.

As they wound deeper into the park, she pointed out every colorful ride and ridiculous attraction they passed: the Rainbow Teacup Ride of Doom, the Duck Pond of Unexpected Surprises, even something that looked like a stage shaped like a giant cat's mouth.

And Yuu just listened.

No need to speak.

"This is it! Wonder Stage!" Emu declared, spreading her arms wide like a magician revealing the grand finale of a trick.

Yuu stood beside her, taking in the view.

The stage loomed ahead like something out of a dream, part circus tent, part storybook theater, with vibrant curtains, spinning spotlights, and whimsical props scattered about.

Twinkling lights traced the outline of the archway, and soft music played in the background, growing steadily louder with each passing second.

It wasn't just a stage.

It felt like a different world altogether.

"Thank you… Otori-san," Yuu said, his voice quieter now.

Emu turned toward him, blinking once, then beaming brightly.

"Ehehe~ No need to thank me! Just call me Emu, okay?" she said, hands on her hips. "And remember—enjoy the show!"

With a playful twirl, she skipped toward the back entrance of the stage, vanishing behind the curtain like a performer ready for her cue.

Yuu remained where he stood for a moment longer, the lights reflecting in his eyes.

Then, slowly, he stepped forward, toward the edge of the audience space, heart beating just a little faster than before.

Something told him this performance was going to be more than just a show.

It was the start of something else.

Something wonderful.

A few minutes passed, and the space before the Wonder Stage steadily began to fill.

Children tugged at their parents' sleeves, eyes wide with unfiltered awe. Parents followed at a gentler pace, some holding soft-serve cones, others balancing balloon strings around their wrists. The air was buzzing with chatter, laughter, and the occasional squeal of excitement.

Near the back, a group of teens gathered, casual, but not without energy.

Several held glowsticks already pulsing with light, while others clutched hand towels printed with colorful characters.

Fans, no doubt.

Maybe regulars.

Yuu stood somewhere in the middle.

Hands in his pockets, shoulders relaxed, he let the ambient sounds wash over him. He wasn't quite smiling—but his eyes carried a kind of still curiosity, sharpened by the familiar yet distant sense of nostalgia curling around the corners of the moment.

The sun dipped lower on the horizon, casting golden light across the stage, painting the vibrant set in even warmer hues. The stage curtains rippled gently in the breeze. Somewhere in the distance, the carousel spun slow and steady.

Then—

The lights dimmed.

A hush spread across the crowd like a ripple through still water.

The curtain twitched once.

And then—

Music burst from the speakers with theatrical flair, lively and loud enough to send a small jolt through the audience.

Spotlights sprang to life, zigzagging wildly before locking into place at the center of the stage.

A familiar voice echoed through the sound system, bold and playful:

"Ladies and gentlemen! Boys and girls! And you too, Yuu-kun, if you're out there—!"

Yuu blinked. "Wait… was that—?"

"Prepare your hearts and ready your smiles!" the voice continued, leaning deeper into its own rhythm. "For the greatest, most wondrous show in the world is about to begin!"

With a dramatic flourish, the curtain whipped open.

A cloud of glitter and confetti exploded into the air, catching the dying sunlight like a cascade of tiny stars.

And there they were.

Wonderlands x Showtime.

Tsukasa stood front and center, arm extended skyward in a commanding pose, his grin as bright as the spotlights themselves. His voice boomed with practiced confidence, feet firmly planted like a performer made for this very moment.

Behind him, Rui stood with effortless poise, purple hair catching hints of gold under the light. His signature smile played on his lips—not wide, not forced—just enough to suggest he was watching everything… and everyone.

At his side, a familiar little robot bounced gently in place.

“NeneRobo,” Yuu murmured to himself.

To the left of the stage, Emu twirled into view in a pink whirlwind, ribbons trailing behind her like stardust. She landed with arms wide and a dazzling cry of:

“Wonderhoy!☆”

From the opposite wing, Nene stepped forward, calm and precise. Her expression remained composed as she activated the handheld controller in her palm, triggering a shimmering cascade of holographic stars that bloomed across the artificial sky.

The crowd erupted.

Children screamed with delight.

Teens waved their glowsticks like they were part of the act.

Even the more reserved parents let themselves smile, caught in the magic of the moment.

Yuu stayed still, watching it all, not with the awe of a child, but with something quieter.

As the final notes of the performance faded into the twilight, a final burst of confetti rained down like shimmering snow.

The lights dimmed, casting the stage in a gentle blue glow as the members of Wonderlands x Showtime gathered at the front.

Tsukasa stepped forward, raising both arms high.

“Thank you, thank you, everyone! We hope you had a truly wondrous time tonight!”

Cheers erupted like fireworks.

Beside him, Emu gave an energetic spin, nearly losing balance but catching herself with a laugh. “Let’s all smile again tomorrow too! Wonderhoy~!”

Rui offered a sweeping bow, his hand resting theatrically over his chest. “This world of joy is made brighter because of you. Until next time, friends.”

Even Nene, who’d mostly kept quiet during the show, gave a small wave from behind her stage controls.

The subtle smile on her lips was almost unnoticeable—unless you were looking.

Yuu was.

The crowd gradually dispersed with the buzz of contented chatter.

hildren were carried on shoulders, teens snapped photos, and the glowsticks began to dim as the night took over.

Yuu remained in place, unmoving.

He hadn't said a word since the curtains closed.

Not because he didn't know what to say.

But he was trying to understand why the knot in his chest had suddenly loosened.

It wasn't the flash or the color, though there'd been plenty of both.

It wasn't the comedy, though Tsukasa's over-the-top act had drawn more than a few laughs from the crowd.

It was them.

Their synergy.

The way Rui subtly supported the pace.

The way Tsukasa took control, but always left room for the others.

The way Emu pushed the energy up and over and the way Nene, even in her quietest moments, anchored it all.

It wasn't a perfect act.

But it was honest.

And that… was rare.

Eventually, he wandered backstage with the help of a staffer, clearly flagged earlier by Rui.

The dressing area behind the stage was smaller than he expected.

Lined with old costume racks and half-worn props, it was equal parts chaotic and cozy.

The first to greet him was Emu, still bouncing on the balls of her feet.

"Did you like it? Did we make you smile??" she beamed, leaning in eagerly.

"…You did," Yuu said, and found himself smiling too—just a little. "I didn't expect to enjoy it that much."

"Hooray!" Emu raised both hands triumphantly. "Another smile saved!"

Tsukasa appeared behind her, chest puffed with pride. "Of course he enjoyed it. I told you we would blow him away!"

Yuu looked over. "You were… kind of unbelievable up there."

"Kind of?" Tsukasa repeated, affronted.

Rui appeared next, arms casually folded. “That’s high praise coming from someone who didn’t even clap.”

“I was watching,” Yuu replied. “Too closely, I guess.”

Nene, seated by her tablet, glanced up. “You always stare like that?”

“I guess I just… get absorbed when something’s real,” he said, then paused. “I’ve seen a lot of shows. But that? That felt like it meant something.”

Tsukasa blinked.

Rui gave a small nod.

“That’s what we try for. Chaos and meaning, dancing together.”

“Isn’t that exhausting?” Yuu asked. “Trying to make it all work? Four people with such different energies?”

Nene answered, surprisingly. “Yeah. It is.”

Emu added, “But that’s what makes it fun!”

Rui smirked. “A little friction makes the spark. Don’t you agree?”

Yuu didn’t answer right away.

He looked at all of them—colorful, strange, genuine—and then said quietly,

“…You guys really believe in what you’re doing.”

Tsukasa gave a sharp nod. “That’s what being a star is all about!”

“And you?” Rui asked, one brow raised. “Why’d you come?”

Yuu thought for a moment. Then gave the most honest answer he could manage.

“I guess… I wanted to see if people could still make magic out of nothing.”

He paused.

“And I think you did.”

There was a silence that followed.

Not awkward—just full.

Then, Rui smiled faintly. “He’s interesting, this one.”

“I like him!” Emu said immediately.

Tsukasa folded his arms. “Hmm… if he keeps watching, he might learn a thing or two about stagecraft.”

“Or he might upstage you,” Rui murmured.

“W-what was that?!”

Yuu let their playful bickering fade into the background. He looked around the room one last time.

The lights, the sweat, the paint-stained tools and the tired, smiling performers.

It wasn’t perfect.

But it was alive.

And in this strange, ever-fracturing world, maybe that was enough.

Chapter End Notes

I LOVE EMU! IT REMINDS ME OF KOKORO FROM BANG DREAM!

Anyways, hope you guys enjoyed today's chapter! I'm open for questions or suggestions!

Question: Did I nail the Wonderland x Showtime's personalities today?

Chapter 14: Not Yours to Whisper

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

[Wednesday]

The morning sun streamed lazily through the windows of Kamiyama High, painting long streaks of light across the wooden floors of Class 1-B.

A soft breeze filtered through a slightly cracked window, ruffling the edge of Yuu Hazuki's notebook as he absently scribbled over the margin.

He wasn't really focused on the lesson.

Not today.

Ever since Tuesday evening, something had shifted.

lightness, subtle but undeniable, lingered in his chest.

The echoes of Wonderlands x Showtime's performance still played at the edges of his memory—dazzling lights, whimsical costumes, spinning colors, and voices filled with joy.

But more than that, it was the passion that struck him.

The fire behind every line and step.

A kind of sincerity that reached beyond the stage.

He'd gone to bed humming their final number.

Now, even in the quiet rhythm of first period, the faintest smile tugged at his lips.

Across the aisle, Toya Aoyagi leaned over slightly.

"Hazuki," he muttered, glancing at him sideways. "You're grinning like someone who just got a love letter."

"I'm not," Yuu replied with a shrug, though he didn't bother trying to hide the smile.

"Then what?"

"...Just in a good mood."

Toya gave him a brief, assessing look before returning to his notebook.

He didn't press further.

Yuu's gaze drifted again, mind wandering back to the stage—the swirl of holographic stars, Emu's laughter echoing under the lights, Nene's steady hands at the control panel, Rui's knowing smile,

and Tsukasa's larger-than-life charisma.

It wasn't just a show.

It was a declaration.

Then the mood in the classroom shifted.

Not dramatically—but enough.

A hush, just beneath the usual hum of chatter.

Heads turned.

Eyes darted toward the hallway.

Whispers gathered in small, hushed clusters.

"Is that…?"

"I think that's Akiyama."

Yuu blinked, pulled from his thoughts.

He followed their gazes toward the door.

Standing just outside, their presence barely acknowledged but impossible to miss, was Mizuki Akiyama.

Light pink hair in a curled side ponytail.

Pale lashes.

A ribbon tied just so.

They carried themselves with a kind of casual elegance that made them stand out without ever seeming to try.

Yuu's eyes narrowed, not in malice, but in knowing.

He recognized the way people whispered.

Voices low.

Words vague enough to seem harmless but cutting all the same.

A kind of cruelty disguised as curiosity.

"Are they even a guy or a girl?"

"So weird, right?"

He exhaled slowly.

He could ignore it.

Pretend not to hear.

Be just another student pretending not to see.

But he didn't move.

He simply closed his eyes for a second, quieting his breath.

"Good thing," he murmured under his breath, "I unlocked a few skills this morning."

He opened his eyes again, and with a thought, two subtle pulses of energy shifted within him.

[Passive Skill: Presence Dissonance – Active]

A soft wave rippled through his aura, dulling it. Muting him. Making him disappear into the background noise, overlooked and unseen by wandering eyes. His existence blurred into the periphery.

But his voice—when it came—was carefully tuned.

"Gosh…" Yuu said softly, as if to no one in particular. "I'm in a good mood today…"

Toya glanced at him, puzzled. "What's wrong? Feeling sick?"

"Kinda."

"Do you need to go to the infirmary?"

"I'm good."

For now...

What should I do?

Yuu asked himself, eyes drifting toward the classroom window where sunlight spilled across the floor in warm, golden streaks.

The murmurs had quieted. Mizuki had already passed, seemingly unbothered, but Yuu knew better.

He'd seen that kind of silence before.

He leaned back in his seat, one hand brushing his chin in thought.

He'd spoken once—just enough to shift the mood.

Enough to interrupt the current without drawing attention to himself.

But the question now wasn't what he could do.

It was how far he should go.

>Should I stay quiet and keep protecting from the shadows?<

>Should I approach Mizuki directly?<

>Should I wait?<

His fingers tapped a slow rhythm against his desk.

Deliberate.

Measured.

He had the skills.

The knowledge.

But those weren't the only things that mattered.

He thought back to what Miku had said, not about being an outsider, but about connection.

About helping someone find their voice.

This world might be a stage.

But Mizuki Akiyama wasn't a character in a story.

They were someone real, in pain, hiding behind smiles.

Just like so many others.

"…Maybe," Yuu murmured under his breath, "it's not about what I should do."

His eyes turned toward the hallway where Mizuki had disappeared.

"Maybe it's about what I'm willing to."

And with that, the next thread began to pull itself into motion.

Quietly.

But surely.

The moment the bell rang, a soft chime signaling the end of the period, a wave of movement rippled through Class 1-B. Chairs scraped back.

Voices picked up.

The rustle of bags and footsteps filled the air as students began filing out for lunch.

[Presence Dissonance – Deactivated]

The subtle pressure in the air released, his presence no longer masked by skill-driven stillness. It was as if a layer of fog had lifted.

He stood, casual and calm, sliding his notebook into his bag without a word.

Beside him, Toya Aoyagi straightened in his seat, turning with a faint glance.

“Hey, Aoyagi,” Yuu said, slinging his bag over one shoulder. “You wanna go to the cafeteria with me?”

Toya blinked, then nodded, brushing a lock of hair from his forehead. “Sure… I heard there’s a new bread today.”

“Sweet. Let’s go.”

Together, they stepped into the hallway, blending with the usual hum of student life. But for Yuu, the gears were already turning again—quietly, deliberately.

Because even as he walked toward lunch, his mind hadn’t left the whispers from earlier.

Or the name Mizuki Akiyama.

Just then, fate—or perhaps mere coincidence—nudged the afternoon onto a different path.

As Yuu and Toya rounded the final corner toward the cafeteria, a familiar voice rang out, rising easily above the hum of lunchtime chatter.

“Oh! Hello, you two!”

It was An.

She stood just ahead, her usual grin lighting up her face, but it wasn’t just her presence that made Yuu pause mid-step.

It was who she was standing beside.

Mizuki Akiyama.

They leaned slightly to one side, their weight resting on one leg in a relaxed slouch.

Their hair—light pink and slightly curled—was tied in a ribboned side ponytail that bounced gently as they turned.

Their pink eyes shimmered under the hallway lights, catching Yuu’s attention more clearly than any whisper from earlier had.

Right…

I forgot Mizuki and An are in the same class.

“Ah! I was just thinking I forgot to introduce you two!” An said brightly, stepping back and gesturing between them. “This is Yuu Hazuki—he’s kind of a backup member of Vivid BAD SQUAD!”

Yuu gave a polite nod, posture calm. “Yuu Hazuki. Nice to meet you.”

Mizuki gave him a once-over, not rudely, but with curious calculation.

Then, they smiled.

“I’m Mizuki Akiyama,” they said, their tone playful but not insincere. “I’ve heard a lot about you from An~”

Their voice carried a strange kind of grace—light, teasing, yet with something deliberate tucked beneath the surface.

Like every word was chosen carefully, even if it didn’t sound that way.

Those eyes…

Not just striking.

Cute.

Mizuki tilted their head slightly, still smiling.

“…Nice to meet you, Hazuki-kun. Let’s get along well, yeah?”

“Likewise,” Yuu replied, his voice steady, but his thoughts still faintly tangled in the moment.

“So? Are you two here for the bread?” An asked, her eyes lighting up with curiosity.

“Too late,” Toya said calmly, holding up a paper bag,

“I already bought the remaining stock.”

“Wha—! That’s cheating!” An gasped, hands thrown up in mock outrage.

Toya didn’t flinch. “Don’t worry. I brought enough for the four of us.”

An blinked. “Wait… four?”

Mizuki chuckled softly, one brow rising as they looked between the three of them. “Oh? I see...

I didn’t realize I got dragged into a lunch group.”

“You didn’t,” Yuu said, a small smile forming. “But I’m not against it.”

An grinned, linking her arms behind her head. “Well, then it’s settled."

They all moved down the corridor together, something easy settling in the air between them.

As they made their way down the corridor, Yuu took the final bite of his cream-filled bread, only to realize, a beat too late, that the cream had smeared across the side of his mouth.

He slowed his pace, wiping at his cheek with the back of his hand, then gave up with a small sigh. “Guys, I’m heading to the bathroom real quick,” he said, gesturing vaguely to his face.

An burst out laughing. “Pfft—yeah, I noticed. You’ve got cream everywhere!”

Mizuki gave a quiet chuckle, hand covering their mouth. “It was kind of impressive, honestly.”

Toya, deadpan as always, gave a single nod. "Yeah."

Yuu gave a small wave and turned toward the boy's restroom.

As he stepped inside, the cool interior greeted him with a hush, the sound of running water from a distant tap echoing faintly.

He moved toward the sink, turning on the faucet and splashing cold water on his face, dabbing at the sticky residue with practiced ease.

Just as he reached for a paper towel, faint voices drifted in from just outside the door.

"…Did you see Akiyama just now?"

The tone was low and pointed.

"I swear, every time I look at them, I still can't tell if it's a boy or a girl."

"Right? It's like they're doing it on purpose or something. All that pink and those ribbons? C'mon."

Yuu paused.

He didn't move.

His hand, still holding the damp paper towel, rested lightly at his side.

The door creaked open slightly as the voices drew closer, the culprits unaware of his presence inside.

"…I bet they get off on the attention. Acting all mysterious and—"

"That's enough."

The words slipped into the air like a razor through silk.

The laughter cut off instantly.

Yuu turned around. There was no anger in his voice.

But the weight in his gaze pressed down like frost.

The three boys froze.

Student A was the first to react, jaw tensing as he tried to save face. "What, don't tell me you fell in love at first sight or something?"

Student C laughed. "Woah, wait—are you telling me Akiyama is actually a girl?"

Student B, who had stayed quiet until now, shifted uncomfortably. "…Guys. That's enough."

But Yuu wasn't looking at Student B.

His eyes stayed on the other two.

“If you’ve got time to run your mouths about things you don’t understand,” he said, voice cool and even, “maybe use it to understand instead.”

The air in the room grew still.

Student A glanced away first, muttering something under his breath.

Student C followed, his grin faltering as he shoved his hands into his pockets and pretended not to care.

Student B gave Yuu a quiet nod before hurrying after them.

He looked at his reflection.

“I really controlled myself there…” Yuu muttered under his breath, voice barely louder than the hum of the flickering fluorescent lights above.

He stared at his reflection.

Still and calm.

But the tension behind his eyes hadn’t left.

With a slow exhale, he shook the remaining water from his fingers, watching droplets scatter across the sink.

The sting of those voices still echoed in his ears.

Familiar.

Bitter.

He grabbed a fresh paper towel, dried his hands, and tossed it into the bin with a practiced flick.

One last glance at the mirror.

Neutral expression.

Shoulders square.

Nothing out of place.

He turned and stepped back into the hallway.

The afternoon light poured in through the windows now, painting warm streaks across the floor. As he neared the cafeteria, familiar voices drifted through the din.

“Geez, what took you so long?” An called, hands on her hips, though she grin with a confused expression.

But when she saw his face, something in her expression shifted—just a flicker.

Her eyes narrowed slightly, tone softening. “You okay?”

Yuu waved a hand, his voice smooth and casual. “I’m fine. Just got caught up washing cream off my face. Turns out sugar fights back.”

Mizuki chuckled, spinning one of their pastel pins with a light touch. “You did look like you lost a battle with a pastry.”

Toya didn’t say anything, but as they resumed walking, he gave Yuu a side glance—brief but sharp.

Yuu didn’t explain.

He didn’t need to.

The hallway noise picked back up, and the four of them melted into it, lunch winding down as students filtered back toward their classrooms.

Eventually, the bell rang again.

After saying their goodbyes, Yuu and Toya walked together down the corridor, the chatter fading behind them.

Then—

“Hazuki,” Toya said, voice low.

Yuu turned. “Yeah?”

“You finally did it, didn’t you?”

“…Did what?”

Toya gave him a dry look. “Don’t give me that. You shut them down. The three who were talking earlier.”

Yuu didn’t answer at first. Then, he smiled—just a little.

“Well,” he murmured, “I can’t just ignore it, right? Especially when it’s someone cute.”

Toya snorted, the corner of his mouth twitching upward in a rare smile.

“…Idiot.”

They walked on in silence after that.

But it was a different kind of silence.

An understanding one.

Chapter End Notes

ALSO SO SORRY IF I PUBLISHED THIS WITH 2k Words only! I'll make up for it! I PROMISE!

Chapter 15: An Outside Visitor (Part 1)

The sky was dark.

Sheets of rain streaked across the windowpane, tracing crooked lines like a film of quiet tears. The steady rhythm of it filled the air, soft and unrelenting, muffled by glass and distance.

Yuu sat cross-legged on the floor of his room, a light blanket wrapped around his shoulders like a shawl.

The morning chill hadn't quite left, and the grey light leaking through the curtains cast everything in a dim, bluish hue.

"It sure is raining hard…" he murmured, eyes watching droplets race each other down the window.

Then—
A soft knock at the door.

"Yuu," came his mother's voice from the hallway. "Looks like you've got no school today."

He blinked. "Suspended?"

"Mhm," she confirmed. "Storm advisory. The whole city's on alert."

"Alright," he replied, voice even.

The hallway quieted again, leaving him alone with the rain and the flickering hum of his desk's interface light.

Yuu leaned back slightly, letting the blanket slip a little from his shoulders.

"…A whole day off, huh?"

Yuu let out a quiet sigh as he pushed himself up from the floor. The blanket slipped off his shoulders and pooled at his feet. He stretched slowly, joints popping faintly in the silence of his room.

The storm outside hadn't let up—if anything, the rain seemed heavier now, its steady rhythm pounding against the rooftop like a heartbeat.

He moved toward his desk, sitting down and tapping the glowing edge of his console.

The [Project Sekai] interface bloomed to life in the air before him, casting a pale blue light across his face.

First, he checked his skill tree. Rows of passive and active abilities blinked softly, some newly unlocked, others still shrouded in grey.

His eyes lingered on a few branches—skills related to emotional resonance, clarity of voice, even memory stability

He traced a finger along one of the unlocked nodes.

“Not bad,” he murmured.

Next, he switched over to his stage logs.

Every song was categorized by difficulty, and nearly all of them were marked FC—Full Combo. Five difficulties, countless hours of practice…

The list felt both like a badge and a reminder.

Still, he didn’t smile.

He simply tilted his head, "There's more to go."

Then, finally, he tapped into the [Sekai Access] window.

The familiar Sekai interfaces shimmered into view:

[School Sekai]

[Street Sekai]

But now…

Two new entries flickered to life:

[Wonderland Sekai]

[Empty Sekai]

For now... Let's start with Wonderland Sekai.

Yuu pressed the glowing icon for [Wonderland Sekai].

The moment his fingertip touched the screen, the world around him dissolved into white.

A soft, white light enveloped everything, blinding and silent, and for a split second, Yuu felt like he was floating, weightless in an in-between space.

Then—

Color.

Noise.

Movement.

His feet touched solid ground again, and the world came rushing in.

A soft gasp escaped his lips as he opened his eyes fully.

He was standing in the middle of a grand, fantastical theme park.

The entry plaza stretched out before him like something out of a dream, brightly colored paths winding through cotton-candy pink trees, animated balloon animals bobbing through the air, and off in the distance…

A Ferris wheel spun slowly under an aurora-painted sky.

A flying train zipped past overhead with a cheerful whistle, trailing rainbow sparks in its wake.

Below it, a floating merry-go-round twirled gently mid-air, each animal sculpted from porcelain-like gloss and suspended by silver threads.

Everywhere he looked, something moved, glowed, or smiled.

"…This is insane," Yuu muttered, eyes wide. "Even more vivid than the real park…"

And at the heart of it all stood the main circus tent.

Tall, striped in twilight blue and white, it pulsed with quiet warmth.

Rows of golden lights lined the edges of the canvas, and star-shaped lanterns dangled like constellations from above, swaying gently as though responding to his presence.

Inside that tent, he remembered, was where Kaito's troupe performed.

Kaito, the troupe leader. And Miku—his helper.
They put on shows here daily, for their audience of...

Yuu blinked, lowering his gaze.

"…Stuffed animals?"

Scattered throughout the plaza were plush toys, some bouncing along the paths, others giggling from shaded benches or whispering to each other with button-eyed curiosity.

One of them—a familiar bunny plushie—sat atop a candy-colored bench, watching the sky.

Yuu's eyes lingered on it.

"Right… the whole world reflects Tsukasa's emotions. Even the arguments the plushies have…"

He paused, "Saki really is lucky to have a brother like him."

Just then—

"Beep-beep! Piipii!"

Something small and mechanical zipped into his vision.

Yuu jumped. "Whoa—!"

It was NeneRobo.

He crouched down, voice softening. "Seeing you this close… you're even cuter than I imagined."

He reached out gently, rubbing the top of its metallic head. The robot blinked once, then gave a cheerful beep, the faint sound of gears whirring in what might've been delight.

"Hm? Oh? I didn't expect to see you here!"

The voice was smooth and bright, almost theatrical.

Yuu turned to find a tall man stepping out from behind a striped column, his navy-blue double-breasted coat fluttering lightly behind him.

Thick gold borders lined the edges, glinting in the soft glow of the SEKAI.

His blue hair framed a warm smile.

"KAITO..." Yuu murmured.

"You must be Yuu Hazuki," KAITO said, eyes sparkling with recognition.

"That's me."

"Wow~ Nice to meet you!" KAITO beamed, holding out a gloved hand with a flourish.

Yuu shook it, returning a small nod. "Likewise."

"So? What brings you to Wonderland Sekai?" KAITO asked, folding his arms behind his back with a relaxed sway. "The others will be here soon."

"If by 'others' you mean them…" Yuu tilted his head toward the distance, where shadows were starting to draw closer.

"Yep! 'Them'!" KAITO said cheerfully.

"Hm. That's fine. I'm just paying a visit," Yuu replied, his voice calm, eyes wandering across the ever-shifting landscape.

"Is that so?"

Before KAITO could continue, a sudden shout echoed through the plaza.

"KAITO! Bad news!"

Two figures rushed toward them—both small, blonde, and visibly alarmed. But when their eyes landed on Yuu, their expressions shifted in an instant.

"Oh?! No way! It's you!"

"I believe you guys know me, too?" Yuu asked, arching a brow slightly.

"Of course!" the girl said proudly, then placed her hands on her hips. "I'm Kagamine Rin!"

"And I'm Kagamine Len!" the boy chimed in, a matching grin on his face.

"Nice to meet you!" they said in unison, flashing peace signs.

Yuu chuckled softly. “Likewise.”

“But—right!” Rin’s face snapped back into urgency. “KAITO! The bad news!”

KAITO leaned in, concern now settling over his expression. “What happened?”

“One of the stuffed toys!” Rin said quickly. “It’s got a cut, and its stuffing is coming out!”

Len nodded, his voice laced with worry. “It’s one of the bunny ones—by the carousel. We think it might’ve gotten snagged on a fence!”

KAITO’s brow furrowed as he straightened. “That’s not good… poor thing. We have to fix it fast or the others might start panicking.”

Rin clutched her fists together. “We need someone to help comfort it! It looked like it was about to cry!”

KAITO turned to Yuu. “Would you mind coming with us, Yuu-kun? I think your presence might help.”

Yuu glanced from KAITO to the twins, then to the path ahead.

“…Sure,” he said, stepping forward. “Lead the way.”

As they hurried along the winding, pastel-colored path toward the carousel, the lanterns overhead swayed gently in the rain-washed breeze, casting soft, shifting shadows over the cobblestones.

The path felt like something out of a storybook—lined with tulip-shaped lamps and overgrown candy-colored bushes. Sentient stuffed animals peeked out from behind tents and oversized flowers, their button eyes blinking curiously at the group as they passed.

Rin and Len charged ahead with urgent footsteps, their voices overlapping as they called out to one another. KAITO and Yuu followed at a more measured pace.

Yuu’s gaze lifted, drawn to the surreal sights above: a floating merry-go-round turning silently in the sky, and a looping train gliding across a track woven from clouds.

The sky shimmered faintly with an aurora borealis that never seemed to fade.

“Everything in this place feels like a dream,” Yuu murmured, half to himself.

KAITO chuckled beside him, his breath fogging faintly in the cool air. “That’s the idea. Wonderland SEKAI reflects imagination—and feelings. The more alive the performers, the more vivid the world becomes.”

Yuu tilted his head slightly, eyes following the flicker of a light drifting across the tented skyline. “So… it reacts to emotions?”

“Exactly,” KAITO replied. He glanced sideways at Yuu, a thoughtful note creeping into his tone. “It responds deeply to people like you.”

Yuu didn’t answer right away.

His pace slowed for just a moment.

"…People like me?"

KAITO smiled gently, not pushing the question further. "You're observant. Quiet, but not detached. Careful with your words. I wouldn't be surprised if this SEKAI already feels a little different just because you stepped in."

"Is that… a good thing?"

KAITO gave a soft laugh, light and reassuring. "Depends on your heart. Wonderland is resilient, but it's also sensitive. If it ever feels too much, don't forget—you're not alone in here. There's always someone close by, ready to reach out."

As they rounded the final bend, the carousel came into view.

Its golden mirrors caught the glow of the aurora, spinning slowly with soft music that tinkled through the still air. Nearby, nestled against a tuft of cotton candy grass, sat a small bunny plushie. Its fabric trembled gently. One of its ears drooped lower than the other, and a small tear along its side exposed tufts of snowy white stuffing. A few strands had fallen onto the ground around it.

KAITO's expression turned calm and focused.

"Alright," he said, crouching down. "Everyone, get me the sewing kit—now."

"On it!" Rin and Len shouted in sync, dashing toward one of the nearby tents with practiced coordination.

Yuu stepped closer, crouching beside the plushie with quiet care. Its button eyes glanced at him, wide and uncertain.

"What can I do to help?" he asked.

KAITO looked up. "The stuffing—some of it's already fallen. We can't leave it behind. Gather what you can."

Yuu gave a firm nod, the blanket still wrapped loosely around his shoulders shifting as he moved to collect the loose tufts.

The cotton was impossibly light in his hands—soft, delicate, like holding the breath of a memory.

"KAITO! Here!"

The voices rang out together as Rin and Len came skidding to a stop, placing a small, pastel-colored sewing kit beside him.

The case was decorated with tiny star-shaped buttons and stitched constellations—quaint, but clearly well-loved.

"Here's the rest of the clean stuffing," Yuu said, gently depositing the soft tufts into KAITO's waiting hands. "The rest… kinda drifted off with the wind."

KAITO gave a warm smile, his gloved fingers already sorting through the material. “That’s alright, Yuu-kun. You did more than enough. Leave the rest to me.”

He turned back toward the trembling plushie, his hands moving with a gentle precision.

With the kind of touch usually reserved for something sacred, KAITO threaded the needle and began to mend the tear, murmuring soft reassurances under his breath.

The bunny plushie’s shaking slowed, its button eyes wide as it watched the stitches come together, loop by loop, sealing it back into wholeness.

Yuu sat back on his heels, watching in silence.

It wasn’t just the act of sewing—it was the kindness behind it.

KAITO didn’t rush.

Didn’t scold.

Didn’t treat the plush like something broken.

Only… something worth healing.

And for some reason, Yuu felt a familiar tightness in his chest.

Like he’d seen that kind of care before—but never received it himself.

KAITO hummed softly as he tied the final knot, then gave the bunny plush a tiny pat on the head.

“There we go. Good as new.”

The plushie blinked up at him, then leaned into his hand.

“As expected of KAITO—that’s amazing!” Rin cheered, her eyes sparkling with admiration.

“Yeah, yeah!” Len echoed, pumping a fist in the air.

KAITO chuckled, waving a hand modestly. “Now, now… It was nothing special.”

The bunny plushie blinked once, then slowly rose to its feet. It gave a tiny, polite bow—its patched ear flopping with the motion—before waddling off toward the cluster of other stuffed animals gathered beneath the carousel’s soft glow.

The other plushies shuffled closer, surrounding their friend in a quiet, joyful reunion, their stitched mouths curved into little smiles.

Yuu watched the scene unfold in silence.

“…You do this a lot?” Yuu asked quietly, turning to KAITO.

KAITO tilted his head, a soft smile on his face. “It happens now and then. Even in Wonderland, things break. But when something breaks, that only means it can be mended.”

He glanced toward the plushies with a wistful gleam in his eyes.

“And sometimes, being broken is how you remember that you were cared for at all.”

Yuu let out a quiet sigh and turned from the carousel, his footsteps slow but sure as he began to walk away from the soft light and singing wind.

“Hm? Where are you going?” KAITO called after him.

“Heading back to the real world,” Yuu replied without looking back. “Then I’ll visit the others.”

“Oh… right,” KAITO said softly.

The rustle of footsteps followed, and moments later, KAITO caught up to him.

He gently placed a hand on Yuu’s shoulder, the warmth in his voice carrying something deeper—hope, maybe. Or concern.

“Yuu-kun,” KAITO said, “whatever happens next… I hope you can save the non-existance Sekai and the Miku resides there."

Yuu paused at that, the words hanging in the pastel air like the last note of a song.

Then he turned, meeting KAITO’s gaze with a calm smile.

“I’m not alone, right?”

KAITO smiled back.

And with that, light overtook Yuu’s vision. The colors of Wonderland SEKAI melted away in a swirl of stardust and cotton-candy sky.

The next moment, he was back in his room.

The rain still tapped gently against the windowpane. His blanket lay where he left it. But something in the air felt different—like he’d brought a piece of that world back with him.

And now… it was time to visit the next one.

Chapter 16: An Outside Visitor (Part 2)

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

[THURSDAY]

After everything that had happened today, Yuu let out a quiet sigh, arms stretching over his head as the wooden chair beneath him creaked in protest.

His body ached with a familiar kind of stillness—not exhaustion, exactly, but the quiet residue of being elsewhere.

Outside, the storm had gentled into a drizzle. Rain slipped down the windowpane in thin, silvery threads, each drop tapping softly against the glass in a lullaby rhythm.

The sky remained heavy and gray, but no longer furious—just tired.

Yuu's eyes lingered on the glass, unfocused.

Wonderland x Showtime.

Even now, the colors from that world clung to the corners of his memory—brilliant banners, glittering lights, floating rides, and voices that reached out like open hands. A stage that seemed to sing with every heartbeat. It wasn't just the liveliest SEKAI he had visited.

It was the most alive.

Warmth bloomed somewhere behind his ribs.

He leaned back in his chair, lips tugging into a faint smile.

"A whole world from joy and performance," he murmured, one hand rubbing the back of his neck. "Guess I shouldn't be surprised it felt like a dream."

Then—
A quiet growl.
His stomach made its discontent known.

Yuu blinked. Then sighed.

"…Right. I should eat something."

He rose from his seat, the blanket wrapped around his shoulders sliding down and pooling at his feet like forgotten fog. Padding down the hallway, he reached the kitchen.

The light was off, but the scent of warm broth and something savory still lingered faintly in the air.

On the table sat a simple meal—rice, miso soup, and grilled fish—neatly covered in plastic wrap. A small note was placed beside it, penned in his mother's looping handwriting:

“If this turns cold, put it in the microwave. I’m heading to work now.”

Yuu stared at it for a moment. The room was quiet again, save for the rain and the soft hum of the refrigerator.

He picked up the note and read it once more.

“…Thanks, Mom,” he said softly, almost under his breath.

And so he did.

Yuu peeled back the plastic wrap and quietly heated the meal, the microwave humming softly as rain continued its gentle patter outside.

The scent of miso and grilled fish filled the small kitchen, comforting and familiar—like a memory that hadn't quite faded.

He sat alone at the table, the soft clink of chopsticks against ceramic the only sound accompanying him.

No words were spoken.

No thoughts interrupted.

Just warmth. Just food.

And for once, that was enough.

When he finished, he rinsed the dishes with practiced ease, the lukewarm water running over his fingers. The silence of the house wrapped around him again—gentle, but ever present.

Yuu returned to his room moments later, the floor creaking faintly beneath his steps. He closed the door behind him with a quiet click, the faint stormlight outside casting muted shadows across the walls.

As he settled back into his chair, he let out another breath.

Calmer now.

But far from finished.

His eyes drifted toward the UI, still faintly glowing on his screen.

“…Guess it’s time to visit the other one.”

His fingers hovered over the next destination.

[Empty SEKAI]

And slowly, he clicked.

His room dissolved into white.

Light consumed everything—his walls, his desk, the floor beneath his feet—and Yuu instinctively shut his eyes against the sudden brilliance.

There was no sound.

No wind.

No warmth.

Just emptiness.

When he finally opened them again, the light had receded.

But the silence remained.

Yuu stood alone.

A vast, barren world stretched around him endlessly.

The sky was a pale, washed-out gray, neither day nor night, and the ground beneath him was flat, featureless, and cold to the touch.

Thin, distant shafts of light pierced the haze above, like pale needles barely holding the world together.

“Empty…” he murmured, his voice swallowed almost instantly by the stillness.

This was unlike anything he’d felt before.

He crouched down, brushing his fingers along the dustless, lifeless terrain. It was solid, yet somehow insubstantial—like touching memory itself.

"For once," he muttered to himself, "I thought I’d need to ask Miku to give me the song Kuyamu to Kaite Mirai… After all…”

He exhaled softly, eyes narrowing as he let the realization settle.

“You have to listen to the song… to access this SEKAI.”

Then, without warning, a presence.

He looked up.

There—halfway between near and far—stood a figure.

A girl.

She wasn’t quite close enough to touch, but not so far that she felt unreachable.

She existed in that strange, surreal middle ground, like everything else in this place.

Her hair was long, unkempt, cascading down to her knees in uneven strands. It began a muted, warm gray at the crown, but darkened into a somber slate as it neared the tips.

Her bangs framed her face with jagged softness, and her eyes, two different colors, stared at him without expression.

Turquoise on the right and Pink on the left.

Her gaze wasn't harsh. Just… still. As if watching him through a fog.

Yuu didn't need to ask who she was.

"This SEKAI…" he whispered, "was created by Mafuyu."

And then—a sensation.

A pressure in his chest.

Tight.

Unfamiliar.

His breath caught as his vision swam for half a heartbeat.

His balance shifted.

"What is this…?" he muttered, pressing a hand against his heart. "No way… am I actually being affected by it?"

A voice answered—close.

Too close.

"You are."

Yuu flinched.

He hadn't seen her move, but suddenly, the Miku was right in front of him. Her presence was heavier now, more real. Like she was no longer part of the backdrop, but now fully aware of him.

Her voice was soft, calm, but tinged with quiet understanding.

"You must be Hazuki Yuu."

"Y-Yeah… That's me," he said, taking a cautious half-step back.

She didn't follow.

"I've heard about you. The one visiting the SEKAIs… and the one chasing the Glitching Miku."

He hesitated. "Then… may I ask something?"

Her head tilted slightly. "What is it?"

"You said I'm being affected, right? By this place?"

Miku nodded once. "Yes."

“I see.” He lowered his gaze.

The fog around his thoughts hadn’t lifted. If anything, it deepened.

But in that stillness, something clicked.

Yuu closed his eyes and raised a hand to his chin in thought.

It’s as if… in each SEKAI, I’m split.<
Like fragments of myself are living inside these worlds, each one mirroring a different piece of me.
<
No wonder I felt so bright in Wonderland… It wasn’t just the world.
It was me. A version of me, pulled out and colored by joy.<
And now, here… the weight, the silence…
Another version of me is emerging.<
One I didn’t know I had.<

He opened his eyes slowly, the dim light of Empty SEKAI reflecting in their depths.

Just then, the Miku before him stirred, only slightly.

She turned, her boots barely making a sound on the featureless ground.

“...Mafuyu,” she called softly, her voice drifting like a ripple across still water. “You can come out now.”

Yuu’s breath hitched.

That name.

His heart skipped as he instinctively looked toward where her gaze had settled, a low, angular shape nestled among the shifting haze.

Almost like a small ruin or forgotten structure, the silhouette hadn’t even registered with him until now. But from its shadow, someone stepped forward.

A girl.

Quiet.

Graceful.

She emerged as if parting from the very stillness of the SEKAI itself.

Her long hair fell in straight, silken sheets past her shoulders, a deep, muted purple that grew darker at the ends—like a twilight that refused to fade.

Her bangs framed her face perfectly, strands brushing lightly over her brow, untouched by wind.

But it was her eyes that caught Yuu.

A mesmerizing gradient—dark violet at the edges, softening into a pale sky blue closer to the center. They seemed to carry no weight, no fire. Just quiet. Still. Empty in the way the air felt in

this place.

As if they were always watching but never searching.

She didn't speak at first.

She simply stood there, eyes meeting his, her face unreadable.

Mafuyu stepped out fully from behind the crumbling structure, her footsteps nearly silent against the barren terrain.

The pale light that filtered through the Empty SEKAI brushed against her features, casting her in an ethereal glow that somehow made her presence feel both grounded… and far away.

Then, she bowed.

"Hello," she said softly, her voice smooth, practiced, gentle in a way that almost felt too precise. "I'm sorry if I hid from you. It's my first time seeing someone here."

Yuu watched her closely.

That smile.

That perfect politeness.

So this is the mask she wears.

A "good girl" expression.

Measured.

Friendly.

Flawless.

But something behind her eyes didn't match.

It was too rehearsed.

Too still.

He closed his eyes briefly.

A breath in.

[Genius of Acting – Activate]

When his eyes opened again, there was a subtle shift in his demeanor, like someone stepping into a perfectly tailored role.

He softened his expression, letting just enough vulnerability show through.

"Sorry for startling you," Yuu said, his voice tinged with a slight nervousness that wasn't real, but believable. "It must've been weird, right? Seeing someone else here?"

Mafuyu blinked, her lips parting slightly in surprise before curving back into that soft smile.

“Y-Yeah… I didn’t expect someone new to be here…” she replied, brushing a strand of hair behind her ear. “May I ask your name?”

“Yuu Hazuki."

She nodded slowly, the smile never leaving her face.

“I’m Mafuyu Asahina,” she said, her voice light. “Nice to meet you.”

And yet, despite the polite greeting and the warmth in her tone…

Her eyes remained cold.

As if they were looking at him through frosted glass.

“Asahina-san,” Yuu said lightly, folding his hands behind his back as he kept his tone gentle, “what school do you go to?”

Mafuyu blinked once, the question catching her only slightly off-guard. “Hm? I go to Miyamasuzaka Girls’ Academy. And you?”

“Kamiyama High,” he answered with a small nod, the rhythm of the conversation flowing effortlessly on the surface.

Her eyes sparked faintly, a sliver of something resembling interest flickering behind the practiced smile. “Really? I have friends who go there.”

“Oh?” Yuu tilted his head, feigning curiosity with a well-timed pause. “Can I ask who?”

“Hmmm…” Mafuyu raised a finger to her chin, pretending to ponder. “Mizuki Akiyama and Ena Shinonome.”

Of course, she’d say that. Yuu knew that already.

But the role he wore kept him from reacting.

He wore the mask of innocence like a second skin.

“Huh? I know them!” he replied with cheerful surprise. “Akiyama-san and Shinonome-san.”

Mafuyu tilted her head, almost as if testing his response. “Really?”

“Well, I met Akiyama-san through An,” he said smoothly, “and I met Shinonome-san through Tsukasa-kun—her younger brother. Actually…” He offered a sheepish grin. “I’m a big fan of Shinonome-san’s art.”

“I-I see…” Mafuyu said softly, her voice faltering just a touch. “As a friend, I’m happy to hear that.”

But her smile didn’t reach her eyes.

She kept talking—lightly, cheerfully—about Mizuki and Ena.

Her words were carefully picked, her expression unwavering. On the surface, it was small talk.

But Yuu could feel the gap between the words.

The distance she maintained without ever moving away.

Miku stood quietly beside them, her expression unreadable as she listened, letting the exchange unfold.

Meanwhile, in Yuu's head, a quiet sigh echoed.

Uwah… This is exhausting…<

Even with [Genius of Acting] active, holding this conversation with Mafuyu's "sunny" persona felt like treading water with weights on his shoulders. Every line was a performance—on both sides. A play with no audience and no script.

Even pretending feels wrong. If only… I could change something.<

He glanced at Mafuyu again—still smiling, still talking.

Then Miku, who had been silent until now, finally spoke.

"Mafuyu," she said gently, her voice softer than the falling rain outside, "this is the first time I've seen you talk this much."

The smile on Mafuyu's face froze, just for half a second.

And in that fleeting moment of stillness…

Yuu saw something underneath.

A pause.

A fracture.

A breath held too long.

Then Mafuyu laughed—light and practiced. "Is that so? Maybe it's because Hazuki-kun is easy to talk to."

"Well," Yuu said, his smile light but his eyes quietly steady as he shifted his weight from one foot to the other, "if we're talking about friends… then of course it would be easy to talk with."

His voice carried the easy rhythm of small talk—but beneath it lay a gentle precision, like someone playing an instrument just slightly off-key on purpose, waiting to see who noticed.

Mafuyu's gaze lingered on him, just for a moment too long.

Then she blinked, the light in her eyes dimming by a shade before flickering back up, refined and unassuming. "You think so?"

"Yep!" he replied with a playful tilt of his head, letting the cheer in his voice settle like glitter over a quiet pond.

Miku, who had remained mostly silent, flicked her gaze between them. Her lips didn't move, but her posture shifted just enough to signal alertness. She wasn't intruding—but she was watching. Closely.

Mafuyu looked down, the hem of her school blouse rustling faintly as she folded her hands in front of her. The air around her seemed to cool, if only slightly.

"…You kind of resemble Mizuki," she said softly.

Yuu's expression didn't falter.

But inwardly, the words struck like a needle through paper.

Not because of what she said.

But because of why she said it.

He didn't answer right away.

Letting the moment breathe.

Letting her feel the silence.

"…That so?" he finally said, tone still warm—but now a touch gentler.

Mafuyu didn't answer. She kept her gaze lowered, fingers gently tightening around each other.

Behind her, the barren horizon of the Empty SEKAI stretched endlessly. No buildings. No wind. Just soft light and open, echoing silence.

Yuu studied her for a moment longer.

He was starting to see it—not just in her voice, or the words she chose, but in the spaces between them.

The silence lingered.

Not heavy—but stretched, like soft cloth caught between careful hands, too delicate to tear, too thin to ignore.

Then, from beside them, Miku's voice drifted in like a breeze slipping gently between curtains.

"…You're not wrong, Mafuyu," she said softly, her eyes lifting toward the pale, cloudless sky of the Empty SEKAI. "Yuu has something… similar."

Mafuyu's head tilted upward, eyes meeting Miku's with quiet curiosity.

Miku wasn't smiling.

But her expression held a warmth that needed no shape.

“It’s the kind of feeling people don’t always notice,” she continued, her voice low, her footsteps quiet as she stepped forward. Her long, grey-tipped twin tails swayed softly with the motion, her sleeves fluttering like ghosts in still air. “But when you’re here long enough, you start to hear it. A resonance.”

She glanced at Yuu, then at Mafuyu.

“Maybe that’s why you’re talking more. Maybe… It’s easier when someone understands without asking too much.”

Yuu blinked, caught off guard by the way her words settled so precisely into something he hadn’t named.

Mafuyu opened her mouth, then paused.

Closed it again.

But her fingers, which had been nervously twisting in her sleeves, stilled.

She exhaled slowly.

“…It doesn’t feel bad,” she murmured at last, almost too soft to reach the edges of the world around them. “That’s all.”

Yuu looked at her, gaze gentle, searching. Then he nodded. “That’s good.”

The windless stillness returned, but something about it had shifted.

Softer now.

Less hollow.

Until—

“I should head out now,” Yuu said, brushing invisible dust from his sleeve.

Mafuyu blinked. “Hm?”

“I want to explore more of this SEKAI, but it seems like… I’ll be pulled back soon.” He looked around at the endless terrain, at the somber light. “I’ll come again.”

Miku offered a small nod. “See you, then.”

But before the world could blur—

“Wait—” Mafuyu stepped forward, voice catching.

Yuu turned, eyes meeting hers once more.

She hesitated again, the same way she had countless times before—but this time, she didn’t retreat behind the mask.

“Talking to you…” she said, her voice gentle, unguarded, “…feels like talking to Kanade.”

She looked down, fingers curling at her side.

Then back up.

“So I’m going to ask something.”

Yuu tilted his head. “Hm?”

“Are we going to meet again?” Mafuyu asked.

For the first time, there was no practiced inflection, no borrowed cheer in her expression.

Just a flicker of something real.

Vulnerable.

Hopeful.

Yuu’s eyes widened slightly.

Then, he grinned, bright and sure.

“Yeah. Expect it.”

And slowly, light gathered around him like mist catching sunlight.

A pulse.

Then—

He vanished.

Leaving only a ripple in the still air, and Mafuyu watching the space where he had stood, one hand unconsciously brushing her sleeve.

“How was it? Meeting Yuu Hazuki?” Miku asked, her voice as soft as the windless air around them.

Mafuyu remained still for a moment, her gaze fixed on the spot where Yuu had vanished only minutes ago. The shadows clinging to her expression had lessened, though they hadn't entirely disappeared.

“…It was great,” she finally said, almost as if surprised by her own answer. “I was going to vent out something here, like always, but… I feel light now.”

Her fingers curled loosely at her sides—no longer clenched, no longer trembling.

“I’m glad you feel light,” Miku replied, and there was a smile in her voice, gentle and sincere.

For a moment, silence settled again between them, not empty, but calm.

[Meanwhile… from Yuu’s perspective]

With a faint shimmer of light, Yuu reappeared in his bedroom.

The familiar sounds of rain resumed, tapping gently against the glass panes.

The room was dim, the overcast sky casting long shadows across the wooden floor.

“Hahh…” he exhaled as he stepped forward, rolling his shoulders.

[Genius of Acting – Deactivated]

The moment the skill dropped, a subtle weight lifted from him, leaving behind a quiet ache—like tension finally unwound.

“I got hungry again…” he murmured, pressing a hand to his stomach. “I should get something.”

The blanket still lay pooled on the floor where he had left it.

He stepped over it, heading toward the kitchen once more.

Outside, the storm hadn’t faded.

The rain still fell in steady sheets, cloaking the world in gray.

But somehow, even as thunder rumbled softly in the distance, the day no longer felt quite as heavy.

Chapter End Notes

How is it? Did I nailed her personality? (Mafuyu I mean)

Chapter 17: It's Just a Storm, What could go wrong?

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

[Thursday – Afternoon]

The storm hadn’t let up.

Outside, the sky was a seamless sheet of churning gray, the clouds low and heavy like they were pressing down on the city itself.

Rain continued to lash against the windows in frantic rhythm, a chorus of droplets dancing across the glass with wild energy.

In the distance, thunder rolled, soft, brooding, not close enough to startle, but near enough to linger like a distant warning.

Yuu descended the stairs in silence, the wooden floorboards groaning faintly beneath the weight of his steps.

His socks whispered against the smooth surface, carrying him into the dim quiet of the living room.

Curtains drawn, the room was cast in a cold, diffused light—subdued and blue-toned, the sort of pale wash that made everything feel softer, lonelier.

He dropped himself onto the couch with a low exhale, grabbing a blanket from the armrest and pulling it over his shoulders.

The fabric was warm, slightly worn, and the kind of comfort that required no thought.

Even so, his thoughts remained unsettled.

The stillness of the Empty SEKAI lingered in his chest, like mist clinging to clothes long after the rain. That silent, fragile world… it had felt distant and close all at once. Quiet didn’t always mean peace.

His eyes slid to the coffee table.

The remote rested there.

"Hmmm..."

He reached for it without thinking, fingers curling around its cold surface, and pressed the power button.

Click.

The TV blinked to life, its dull glow painting the room in flickering light. After a brief moment of static, the clear voice of a news anchor filled the air, slicing through the quiet.

“—continuing coverage on the low-pressure area affecting Shibuya, Tokyo. The tropical storm is expected to linger until late Friday, with heavy rainfall and strong winds continuing throughout the night…”

Yuu leaned his head back against the couch, letting it tilt slightly toward the ceiling, eyes half-closed.

“Still storming, huh…” he muttered.

The anchor’s voice continued, faint against the crackle of rain.

“Meanwhile, local authorities have issued reminders for students to remain indoors. All school activities remain suspended until further notice…”

Yuu barely heard the words. His thoughts were already drifting again, fragments of Wonderland’s laughter and Empty SEKAI’s silence colliding like waves in his mind.

Then, he let out a dry chuckle.

“Hm… You know what? It's just a storm."

He sat up, tossing the blanket aside and pushing himself off the couch.

Moving with sluggish determination, he padded back upstairs to his room.

It didn’t take long to throw something together.

He slipped on a raincoat, an old one, slightly too tight around the shoulders now, the sleeves just shy of his wrists.

But it still clung to him with the familiarity of childhood, like muscle memory.

Phone.

Wallet.

Pocketed with practiced ease.

Back downstairs again.

He stopped by the genkan, his hand reaching for the umbrella leaning by the door. A click echoed faintly as he popped it open.

The metal groaned just a little from the years of use, but it held strong.

Yuu paused, hand resting on the doorknob.

Outside, the world was a swirling blur of wind and water.

Raindrops raced down the glass of the small window by the door, and the overgrown hydrangeas near the porch swayed under the weight of the storm.

The moment he opened it, the wind pressed in—cool, damp, smelling of earth and concrete and thunder.

His raincoat fluttered.

Umbrella in hand, Yuu stepped out into the wild gray.

He closed the door behind him with a soft click, the familiar sound swallowed quickly by the wind as he stepped onto the damp pavement.

The air was sharp and cool, brushing against his cheeks like wet silk. His umbrella wobbled in his grip, straining against the push of the storm as he tightened his hold around the handle.

The rain hadn't lightened.

If anything, it seemed to come down harder now, like the sky was trying to wring out every last cloud. Puddles lined the sidewalk, some shallow, some deep enough to splash up against his shins as he jogged. The hems of his pants clung to his legs, slowly drinking in the water despite the umbrella overhead.

Still, he didn't slow down.

His sneakers slapped rhythmically against the wet ground, his breath curling in front of him in little clouds.

The neon glow of the convenience store finally came into view, flickering through the rain like a distant lighthouse. The soft hum of fluorescent lights spilled out from the glass doors, warm and sterile and comfortingly mundane.

Yuu reached it with a final splash of steps, slowing as he approached the entrance. He folded the umbrella with one practiced shake, water flying off in messy arcs, then stepped inside.

A bell chimed overhead.

Warm air greeted him, laced with the scent of instant noodles, fresh bread, and vinyl flooring. Shelves stretched out in neat rows—colorful, packed, humming with fluorescent buzz.

For a brief second, Yuu just stood there.

Drenched.

Dripping.

Heart steadying.

The real world was dull in comparison to the Sekai. The walls didn't breathe emotion. The floor didn't shift with thought.

But in a way, that was comforting.

Predictable.

He exhaled quietly, shoulders relaxing as he started down the nearest aisle.

"…Let's see what snacks you've got for me today," he murmured, letting the ordinary buzz of refrigeration units guide him forward.

“Oh? Hazuki-kun, I didn’t expect to see you here.”

The voice cut softly through the low hum of the store, calm and unmistakable.

Yuu turned, blinking away the beads of rain still clinging to his lashes.

The harsh fluorescent lights above cast long shadows across the tiled floor, and standing just a few paces from the canned drinks aisle was a familiar figure.

“Ichika-san,” he said, surprised, but polite as ever. “What a coincidence…”

Hoshino Ichika stood beneath the flickering store lights with the kind of quiet composure she always carried.

Her hair was damp at the ends, sticking slightly to her raincoat, and beneath it, she wore a simple white hoodie and jeans—casual, clean, like someone who could blend in anywhere, yet somehow still stand out.

She offered a gentle nod, her expression unreadable but warm.

Before Yuu could say more, another presence slid into view beside her, cheerful and quick.

“Huh? Is that Yuu-kun?!”

A flash of pink.

“S-Saki-san…” Yuu blinked as Tenma Saki bounded up to him, her usual sparkle undiminished even under the sterile lighting of the convenience store.

Her shoulder-length hair was slightly frizzy from the rain, and her cheeks were flushed—either from the cold or her usual excitement, it was hard to tell.

Her hands clasped behind her back, she leaned forward with a grin that could have lit up the freezer aisle. “Just call me Saki! No need to be shy!”

“…Okay. Saki-san, then,” Yuu replied, not unkindly.

She gave a tiny pout at the persistent honorific, clearly hoping he’d drop it altogether, but decided to let it slide, for now.

Ichika took a slow step forward, tilting her head slightly. “By the way, what brings you here, Hazuki-kun?”

Yuu lifted the small plastic basket in his hand, half-filled with a bottle of green tea, a sweet bread wrapped in shiny cellophane, and a pack of gum. “Craving snacks.”

“Coincidence!” Saki chirped, clapping her hands together with a soft slap. “We were just saying the same thing! I told Ichika I needed something sweet after all that math homework!”

Ichika let out a small sigh, but the faint smile on her lips softened it. “More like you dragged me here before I could finish mine.”

Yuu gave a quiet chuckle, the corners of his lips lifting. “So you guys still have homework even with this storm going on?”

Ichika raised an eyebrow, folding her arms loosely over her chest. “Isn’t Kamiyama High strict too? Don’t tell me… You haven’t done a single assignment?”

Her tone was teasing, her smirk almost mischievous.

Yuu deadpanned in return. “Nope. I already finished it.”

That caught them both off guard.

Ichika blinked, clearly not expecting that answer, while Saki let out a surprised laugh. “Wait, seriously? And here I was feeling accomplished for just finishing two subjects!”

Yuu shrugged. “I guess I just didn’t want it hanging over me.”

>Yuu is a college student in real life.<

“Wow… diligent,” Ichika said, her eyes narrowing slightly in amusement. “You’re the type who does things quietly but gets them done before anyone notices, huh?”

Yuu gave no response at first—just a slight grin and a sideways glance. “I try.”

Eventually, their light conversation faded into the quiet rhythm of the convenience store—the rustle of plastic wrappers, the soft whir of refrigerators, and the low, steady hum of fluorescent lights casting a pale glow over their heads.

Yuu’s basket had grown noticeably heavier by now. Nestled among the contents were a chilled bottle of tea, a pack of melon bread, a couple of chocolate-covered biscuits, and two neatly wrapped onigiri—impulse picks, but he figured he’d thank himself later.

Across from him, Ichika stood near the refrigerated drinks, her movements calm and deliberate as she slipped a carton of milk tea into her modestly filled basket.

A small, healthy-looking salad lay beside it, still perfectly arranged.

Efficient.

Minimalist.

Entirely Ichika.

Then there was Saki.

Her basket, in contrast, looked like it had gone through a treasure hunt. Colorful sweet breads peeked out from the edges like little flags of victory, a pair of strawberry pudding cups nestled near the center, and, balancing precariously on top, an energy drink that swayed dangerously with each of her steps.

With great theatrical flair, she placed a final pastry atop the mountain and stepped back dramatically. “Balance!” she declared, holding up a finger as if she had just cast a spell.

Yuu raised an eyebrow, eyeing the confection tower. “Are you planning to eat all that tonight?”

“Of course not!

But if the storm traps us again tomorrow, I’ll be ready. Dessert and breakfast in one go!”

Ichika glanced sidelong at her, lips quirking into a mix of amusement and mild disapproval. “You treat the convenience store like a theme park.”

“Because it is one,” Saki shot back cheerfully, hugging her basket like it was a prized plushie. “It’s the theme park of snacks and sudden cravings!”

Yuu chuckled, the sound low and relaxed. “Well… at least you’re prepared for the apocalypse.”

Saki flashed him a peace sign. “You never know what tomorrow brings!”

As they made their way to the counter, their footsteps soft against the gleaming tile floor, the sound of rain outside seemed to dim, as though the weather, too, had decided to take a moment of calm.

Yuu stepped up to the register first, placing his modest collection of snacks on the counter.

The cashier gave a short nod and began scanning the items one by one, the beep of each barcode echoing through the otherwise quiet space.

Tea.
Melon bread.
Onigiri.
Biscuits.

His phone buzzed lightly in his pocket as he reached for his wallet, but he ignored it for now.

Once Yuu paid for his snacks, the soft rustle of plastic bags followed.

The cashier handed him the neatly packed items, warm onigiri pressing gently against the bottle of tea inside the bag.

He gave a quiet nod of thanks and stepped aside as Ichika took her turn, followed closely by Saki, who nearly dropped one of her pudding cups in her rush to balance the rest.

Outside, the sound of rain tapping on the awning had grown gentler, a steady whisper rather than a downpour.

Yuu adjusted the strap of his bag. “Looks like this is it.”

“Yeah,” Ichika agreed, her calm voice blending easily with the hush of the store.

“Good luck to you two,” he added, offering a small wave.

But Ichika turned, her tone just a touch more casual than before. “Hazuki-kun, if you don’t mind… do you want to practice later?”

Yuu blinked once before nodding. “I don’t mind. I’m free anyway, and…” He trailed off briefly, then smiled, “I want to practice my guitar skills.”

I can’t just rely on my cheat skills after all. <

That thought lingered in his mind like a quiet promise.

“Ohhh?” Saki leaned in dramatically, puffing out her cheeks. “What’s this? You two… are you secretly going out without me?”

Her pout was exaggerated, her voice playful, but her eyes twinkled with amusement.

Yuu raised both hands defensively, smiling. “It’s not like that.”

“I just thought it would be good practice,” Ichika added, though there was the faintest pink hue warming her cheeks.

“Hmmmm… I’ll let it slide this time,” Saki said with a giggle, falling back into step beside them. “But next time, invite me too!”

The three stepped out beneath the awning, where the cool scent of rain and earth met them like a gentle breeze. Umbrellas opened with soft clicks, and their silhouettes stretched faintly against the wet pavement as they parted ways.

And just like that, the storm continued, but the quiet company lingered.

With the soft thud of his footsteps against rain-slicked pavement, Yuu made his way home beneath the dim glow of streetlamps. The storm had calmed briefly—just enough to let him slip through the evening without getting soaked.

By the time he reached the front gate of his house, the wind had started to rise again, tugging at the hem of his coat. The sky above rumbled low, like a warning that the reprieve was over.

He stepped onto the genkan just as the first heavy droplets began to fall again. The moment he shut the door behind him, a gust of wind howled past outside, and the rain came pouring down in sheets.

“Ahh… I’m glad…” he whispered to himself, the quiet words melting into the sound of rain hammering the roof.

He loosened the raincoat, set the umbrella aside, and slipped out of his shoes with a tired but contented sigh.

Warm, dry, and home—just in time.

Just as Yuu set the plastic bag of snacks onto the coffee table, the lights above him flickered once… then died with a soft click.

Everything went dark.

The steady hum of the refrigerator cut out, and the faint buzz of the TV silenced in an instant. Only the rhythmic drumming of rain against the windows remained.

“…Really.”

Yuu stood still for a moment, blinking into the darkness.

A beat passed.

Then two.

He sighed quietly, letting the silence settle.

The storm must've finally gotten to the power lines.

Reaching into his pocket, he pulled out his phone, the screen lighting up his face with a pale blue glow. The faint light cast shadows across the walls—long, stretched silhouettes of furniture and shelves.

"Well… at least I already bought snacks," he muttered, slumping down onto the couch as he tapped on the flashlight app and aimed the beam at the coffee table.

Melon bread, chocolate biscuits, and a bottle of tea.

Emergency rations for a stormy night.

"This is fine," he told himself, leaning back with the faintest smirk. "Just... atmospheric."

The house creaked faintly as the wind brushed past the windows again.

He took a bite of melon bread and sat in the dim glow of his phone, alone with the storm, the dark, and his thoughts.

Hmm? Since the power's out...

I wonder if Ichika-san is doing okay...

[Meanwhile… at Ichika's house]

The storm whispered against the windows, its presence steady and persistent, like fingers tapping insistently against glass.

A low rumble echoed somewhere in the distance—distant thunder, more grumble than growl.

And then, without warning, the room was swallowed by darkness.

The hum of the refrigerator died. The lights blinked out.

"I-Ichika! You're still there, right?" Saki's voice rose sharply, tinged with panic. It came from the couch, where she sat bundled under a soft throw blanket like a wary squirrel in its burrow.

"I'm here, Saki," came the calm reply, further back in the house.

Ichika's voice was always steady, even now as she moved through the darkened hall with quiet, deliberate steps. "I'm just getting a candle."

The soft rustle of movement followed, punctuated by the metallic clink of something being retrieved from a drawer.

Saki tightened her grip on her phone, its faint blue glow casting eerie highlights on her face. "Uuu… the timing is so unfair. I was just about to eat my pudding…"

Footsteps returned, slow and assured, and then a small flare of orange burst to life, Ichika's match catching the wick of a thick white candle. A warm glow bloomed from the center of the room, dancing shadows along the walls like ghosts in slow motion.

"There," Ichika murmured, placing the candle carefully on the low table between them. The soft flame reflected in her eyes, lending them a quiet depth.

Saki leaned in, cheeks puffed. "You're way too calm… what if a ghost shows up or something?"

Ichika gave her a sideways glance and a small, amused smile. "Then we'll offer it some pudding and ask it to leave nicely."

Saki stared for a beat, then burst into giggles. "Wait—nooo! That's my pudding!"

Ichika chuckled gently, the sound low and rare, like distant chimes in a still room.

And then, her smile faded slightly.

She turned her gaze toward the window, where the storm outside painted streaks of water along the glass like weeping lines.

"…Hazuki-kun," she murmured, almost to herself.

Saki blinked, hearing the name.

Ichika reached for her phone, her brows drawn just slightly in thought.

"Since the power's out…" she said softly, "I wonder if he's okay."

Chapter End Notes

I'm gonna take a break just for today.

Please let me know what you think in today's chapter in the comments! Also, please drop a kudo if you liked it!

Chapter 18: Unmuted Thoughts

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

[Mafuyu's perspective]

The soft whir of her laptop fan was the only sound in the room.

Outside, the world was pale and still, clouds hanging low like heavy thoughts.

Inside, Mafuyu Asahina sat in front of her screen, the soft glow of her monitor casting cool light across her face. Her expression, as usual, was composed.

Blank, but not empty.

Just quiet.

She stared at the chat window.

[Call starting…]

The sound of the ring echoed once.

The soft ring pulsed once. Then again. Echoing through the silence like ripples on a frozen lake.

One by one, the call icons bloomed to life—tiny avatars flickering into place.

A familiar, calm voice was the first to break the stillness.

>“Good evening, Yuki.”<

The name was habitual.

A mask was used between them.

A safety line.

>“K,”< Mafuyu replied, voice even, precise.

Her words, like her face, carried no inflection—just function.

There was nothing cold in the exchange.

But nothing warm, either.

Just a kind of weightless care, as if both sides had learned long ago to tread lightly over their own reflections.

Another soft chime.

>“Hello!”<

Ena Shinonome—Enanan—burst into the call like sunlight slipping through half-drawn curtains. Her tone danced at the edges of cheerfulness, practiced in its rhythm. Yet even now, there was something faint beneath it—something too smooth to be completely real.

>“Good evening…!”<

The third voice, Amia—Mizuki Akiyama—followed soon after.

Now they were all present.

The room didn’t feel louder.

Just… fuller.

A silence passed between them. Not awkward—just waiting.

Until, eventually, Mizuki’s voice rose again, >“The storm yesterday was the worst, right?”<

Their words drifted into the call, wrapped in a sigh too performative to be entirely serious.

The kind that lingers a beat longer, designed to draw attention without demanding it.

“Ugh, don’t even remind me... I was drawing something until the power went out,” Ena groaned, her voice carrying its usual flair. Not truly frustrated—just making herself heard, as always.

From the other end, the silence hung for a moment.

Mafuyu listened, her gaze shifting—not to her laptop, but to the flickering candle set just outside her periphery, its flame quivering with each faint draft in her room.

Then, her voice cut softly through the static:

“I didn’t notice the thunder,” she said, tone level.

No weight behind the words.

Just a fact.

There was no pause for pity.

No attempt to explain.

Only a quiet acknowledgment.

It was Mizuki who answered next, voice bright with gentle teasing:

> “Of course you didn’t. You’re always so composed, Yuki. Or maybe you were busy thinking again?”<

The sentence ended with a light laugh, soft, not biting.

But behind the humor, the familiarity clung.

The kind that said: I notice when you're distant, even if I never say it outright.

“How about you, K?” Ena’s voice slid through the call again—lighter now, with that practiced playfulness she often used when the air began to dull. It sounded effortless, tossed like a casual pebble into still water.

Kanade’s voice came through, soft and steady—like the hum of an old piano played alone in an empty room.

“It wasn’t too bad. I stayed inside and worked on the new composition.”<

“As expected of K.”< Mizuki replied, their tone light with a thread of admiration.

“What kind of song is it?”< Ena asked, curiosity curling at the edges of her voice. It wasn’t pushy—just the sort of quiet interest that always stirred when Kanade mentioned a project.

Kanade paused again before answering.

“Still trying to find the right words. The sound’s there. But it’s... distant.”<

“Distant?”< Mafuyu repeated, her voice as calm as ever.

“Like something trying to reach out, but it’s stuck behind a wall.”<

The call went quiet for a second—no static, no clicks. Just the sound of breath held in a space made for four.

“I think I get that,”< Mizuki said at last, their usual playfulness dimmed.

Ena didn’t speak, but when she finally did, her tone was quieter than usual.

“That’s kind of… fitting, isn’t it? For us.”<

Kanade’s reply came without hesitation.

“Maybe that’s why I want to finish it.”<

Mafuyu didn’t reply right away.

Instead, she let the quiet linger.

Not uncomfortable.

Just... honest.

“I’d like to hear it,”< she said softly, her voice nearly lost under the hum of her laptop’s fan.

Just then, a soft knock echoed at Mafuyu’s door, barely louder than the hum of her laptop.

Without a word, she moved the cursor with quiet precision, muting her mic and switching the tab from Nightcord to her open study document.

The motion was seamless, practiced.

“Yes?” she called, her voice instantly lighter, sweeter—an effortless shift in tone, like slipping into a mask she’d worn countless times.

The door opened slowly with a soft creak, and her mother stepped in, carrying a small plate.

The gentle aroma of something warm and sweet filled the air.

“I baked some cake,” her mother said with a smile. “Here you go.”

Mafuyu’s lips curved upward—perfectly polite, perfectly bright.

“Wow! Thank you!”

Her tone sparkled, smooth as glass.

To anyone listening, she sounded delighted.

To anyone watching, she looked like the ideal daughter.

Her mother returned the smile, nodded once, and stepped out, closing the door behind her with a quiet click.

The moment the door shut, Mafuyu’s expression softened, not quite falling, but fading back into its usual stillness.

She placed the plate gently on the edge of her desk, then returned to her laptop screen.

A single, calm breath.

Then she unmuted her mic.

The call’s quiet rhythm resumed as Mafuyu rejoined—her voice as level as ever.

“No. Just my mother.”<

“I see…”< Kanade murmured softly.

Then, without warning, Mizuki’s voice livened the air again, slipping in like a breeze laced with playful energy.

“More importantly…”< they began, drawing the syllables out with theatrical suspense, >“I have a new friend.”<

Ena perked up on the other end, her tone tinged with genuine curiosity. >“Eh? Who?”<

There was a pause—a deliberate one, like Mizuki was savoring the reveal.

“Hazuki Yuu!”<

For a moment, the voice call fell silent.

Not awkward, not startled—just… still.

Like everyone had paused to search a distant memory.

Then Mafuyu’s voice came through, softer than usual. Not flat. Not empty. Just… thoughtful.

“Amia… You know Hazuki-san?”<

“Yeah…!”< Mizuki replied brightly. >“We ran into each other a few times recently. He’s kind of quiet, but there’s something about him, you know?”<

Ena, who had been unusually quiet, finally spoke up. Her voice had lost its usual bite—there was no sarcasm in it. Just something contemplative.

“I… also know that name. Hazuki Yuu… Akito’s mentioned him before. Said something about him helping An with stuff in Vivid BAD SQUAD.”<

Mafuyu didn’t respond immediately.

Her gaze had lowered again, to the slowly melting candle beside her keyboard. The flicker of the flame danced in her eyes, reflecting something unreadable.

Yuu Hazuki.

That name again.

Not just from the Empty SEKAI.

Not just a passing stranger.

But someone… intersecting across lives she knew. People she was connected to.

And now—he had spoken with Mizuki.

And Ena.

How curious.

“I met him in the Empty SEKAI.”<

Mafuyu’s words dropped into the conversation like a pebble into still water—small, quiet, but rippling outward.

Ena’s sharp breath was the first to break the silence.

“Wait, what? You met him… in a SEKAI?”<

Her voice had shifted—surprise, yes, but laced with something else. Not disbelief, exactly. More like a cautious kind of concern. The Empty SEKAI wasn’t a place they spoke of lightly.

Mafuyu didn’t respond right away. When she did, her voice carried that same careful distance. Not cold. Just… slow. Thoughtful.

“Yes. In the Empty SEKAI.”<

There was a pause. A long one.

Kanade, ever quiet, didn’t speak—but her silence said enough. Mizuki, usually the first to poke fun or keep the mood light, stayed quiet too.

The weight of the name—Empty SEKAI—hung between them like fog, unspoken memories threading the space between the four.

“That’s…”< Ena began, her tone now far more subdued, >“That SEKAI isn’t easy to enter. Most people wouldn’t even know it exists unless…”<

“Unless they’ve heard the song,”< Mafuyu finished, her words coming as gently as the candle flame beside her.

“Kuyamu to Kaite Mirai,”< Kanade said softly. Her voice, though barely more than a whisper, gave the song a gravity none of them missed.

A soft crackle from someone’s mic echoed in the silence that followed, like static mirroring the tension.

Then Mafuyu added, just a touch quieter than before:

“Miku knows him… so I decided to trust her.”<

Simple. Honest.

But in that trust, there was something fragile. Something that made even Mizuki stay quiet just a moment longer than usual.

Ena finally murmured, >“…I didn’t expect that.”<

Kanade: still silent.

But Mafuyu didn’t mind.

Because, for the first time in a long while, her words hadn’t echoed into emptiness.

There was a soft shift in the air, like the pause before rainfall.

“Do you trust him, Yuki?”< Mizuki asked.

Their voice, usually colored with laughter or mischief, now held a rare seriousness. Not accusing. Not pressing.

Just… curious.

Gentle.

Mafuyu’s eyes flicked toward the soft glow of the candle on her desk, its flickering light casting long shadows across her room. She didn’t answer right away.

The silence stretched, but no one interrupted.

Then—

“I think I do,”< she said at last.

Her voice wasn’t certain, but it wasn’t unsure either. It sat somewhere in the middle, like someone realizing they’d already made up their mind without noticing.

“It’s strange,”< she continued after a breath. >“He doesn’t ask too much. Doesn’t try too hard. But I felt like… if I had spoken honestly, he would’ve listened.”<

Kanade’s voice entered, soft and almost imperceptible.

“That’s rare.”<

“Mm.”< Ena added, her tone unusually thoughtful. >“Most people just get uncomfortable when they don’t understand someone.”<

“But he didn’t.”< Mafuyu said.

And for a moment, there was nothing more to add.

No teasing.

No jokes.

Just a quiet understanding shared through the wires—fragile, but real.

“I want to meet him someday.”<

Kanade’s words were soft—almost like a thought spoken aloud rather than a statement meant for the others to hear. But in the silence that followed, they lingered. Quiet, but not unnoticed.

Mizuki let out a small hum, somewhere between agreement and curiosity.

“He’s not exactly hard to find. Just don’t blink too long or he might disappear into thin air,”< they joked gently, though there was warmth behind the words.

“He kind of does have that vanishing act vibe,”< Ena added, a dry chuckle slipping into her voice. >“Still… I didn’t think he’d be the type to leave an impression on all of us.”<

“It’s not that he tried to,”< Mafuyu murmured. >“He just… did.”<

No one argued with that.

In their own ways, each of them had noticed it.

Yuu Hazuki—quiet, measured, strange but sincere—had quietly stepped into their orbits like someone passing through a dim room with a lantern.

Never loud.

Never boastful.

But somehow… casting just enough light for others to notice something they hadn’t before.

[Meanwhile, from Yuu’s perspective]

The soft flicker of the television bathed the living room in shifting hues of pastel blue and pink, its glow the only real light left in the house.

The power had returned sometime earlier, but Yuu hadn't noticed—not really. He was already lost on the screen.

MORE MORE JUMP!'s live performance was in full swing—bright, polished, and bursting with energy.

The girls danced across the virtual stage, their voices harmonizing with practiced ease, expressions beaming with conviction.

The screen pulsed in time with the music, drawing the viewer in like a rhythm that wrapped around the heart.

Yuu, curled into the corner of the couch, watched with a quiet gaze, not exactly starstruck, but thoughtful.

Calm.

His chin rested lightly on his knuckles, elbow propped against the armrest.

He wasn't smiling, but his expression had softened.

Footsteps.

He barely turned as his mother passed by the doorway, pausing with a small smirk when she caught sight of the screen.

"Oh? Yuu-kun," she said, her voice teasing and light, "I didn't know you were actually interested in girls."

Yuu blinked once, slow.

Then exhaled through his nose.

"…I'm interested in their music," he replied flatly, not even turning his head.

His mother laughed, the sound trailing away as she moved down the hall. "Whatever you say~"

He let out a sigh once she was out of earshot and leaned further into the cushions.

But as the performance continued, something in his gaze lingered.

Not just admiration, but understanding.

A quiet thought.

They're really trying, too… even when no one sees the whole story.

He reached for the remote, lowering the volume just a bit.

Still… I wonder what their SEKAI is like?<

Chapter End Notes

I know I said that I'm gonna take a break but here...

Chapter 19: Study Group with VBS + (FAQ)

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

The rain had finally passed.

After two full days of thunderclouds draping Shibuya in an oppressive blanket of gray, Saturday arrived like a sigh of relief, clear, quiet, and still.

Sunlight streamed softly through the sheer curtains of Yuu Hazuki's bedroom, painting pale gold rectangles across the wooden floor.

The gentle scent of petrichor still clung to the air outside, drifting in through the slightly cracked window, fresh and earthy like the world had just been rinsed clean.

Yuu lay sprawled across his bed, a lazy sprawl that spoke more of aimlessness than rest.

One arm folded behind his head, the other dangling off the side, fingers twitching faintly in time with the slow rhythm of the electric fan whirring overhead.

Its breeze brushed against his skin like a sigh, neither warm nor cool, just there.

Persistent.

Background noise.

Classes at Kamiyama High had been suspended for two days thanks to the storm, with teachers hastily throwing together online "asynchronous modules" that they hoped would pass for productivity: scanned worksheets, vague reflection prompts, multiple-choice quizzes uploaded to the school portal without much care.

Yuu had completed all of them in one sitting.

Not out of enthusiasm.

Just muscle memory.

With the mind of a college student stitched into the body of a high school freshman, most of the material felt like a review of a game he'd already cleared—one where he still remembered the enemy patterns and shortcut keys.

The only thing difficult about it was pretending it took any real effort.

Now, he stared at the ceiling—white, textured, and painfully empty.

"Boring…" he muttered, voice flat with the weight of a day that hadn't even begun.

His phone buzzed.

Yuu blinked, then turned his head to the side, half-reached, dragging his hand toward the device beside his pillow.

The screen lit up.

Akito Shinonome
The contact name glared back at him, followed by a flood of unread messages that scrolled down the screen like a one-sided argument.

8:02 AM
“Hey.”
“Hey.”
8:03 AM
“Hey.”
“Are you done with the asynchronous task?”
“Lend me your notes, Toya won’t let me.”
“Hey.”
“Hey.”

Yuu stared at the chat, expression blank.

Then he exhaled—part sigh, part laugh—as his thumb hovered over the keyboard.

Who else had the patience to spam “hey” seven times in less than sixty seconds but not the patience to study?

“If Aoyagi-san won’t let you, then I won’t.”
Sent.

The message blinked once, then vanished into the thread.

Yuu dropped his phone onto his chest with a soft thud, his arm falling limp beside him once more.

A faint smirk tugged at the corner of his lips—not a real smile, but something close. The kind of expression you make when someone acts exactly the way you expected them to.

His screen lit up again almost immediately.

“Tch. You two sure are best friends.”

Yuu didn’t answer right away. Instead, he let the silence stretch, staring up at the ceiling as the words replayed in his mind.

Best friends.

He could practically hear the sarcasm in Akito’s voice, even through text. Sharp, biting, but never cruel. That specific Shinonome-brand grumble: half-annoyed, half-sincere.

Maybe it wasn’t wrong.

Toya had been the first person to notice him at school.

The first to invite him into a conversation, even if it had been about homework. The first to treat him like a classmate, not just a shadow in the back of the room.

Akito came after, loud, pushy, impossible to ignore.

And now?

Here they were.

Spamming each other in the middle of a quiet Saturday, like any other pair of students bored out of their minds.

Yuu sighed, then picked up his phone again, thumbs tapping lazily against the screen.

[Yuu]

“I’m not a cheat code, Shinonome.” - Sent

He watched the “typing…” bubble appear.

Then disappear.

Then reappear.

Then disappear again.

Finally, another message popped up.

“You are to me.”

Yuu blinked.

Then laughed—an actual laugh, short and breathy and caught off guard.

He buried his face into the pillow for a moment, shoulders shaking just slightly with restrained amusement.

“God, you're such a dumbass...” he mumbled into the fabric.

But when he looked up again, something had shifted.

His phone buzzed again.

"I’ll treat you, if you lend me your notes."

Yuu stared at the message for a beat, then raised a brow. Bribery now, huh?

"What do you have in mind?"

The reply was instant.

"Cheesecake."

That made him pause.

A thoughtful hum slipped from his throat as he propped himself up slightly, fingers drumming lazily against the side of his phone.

"Deal. I’m craving some sugar anyway. Where do we meet?"

Another bubble popped up, without hesitation.

"At your house. Send me the location."

Yuu blinked.

"Of all the places, why my house?"

The response came with a digital scoff Yuu could practically hear in Akito’s voice.

"What, you want to go to my house?"

Yuu was halfway through forming a sarcastic retort when the next message appeared—and froze him mid-keystroke.

"I’m not letting you meet Ena."

His brows lifted just slightly.

Now that was unexpected.

Yuu’s fingers stilled, then resumed tapping—this time with a bit more amusement.

"Do I look like I’m the type of friend who wants to hook up with your sister? That’s messed up."

The typing bubble pulsed. Then:

"An said you’re interested in her."

Yuu let out a small, short breath through his nose. Not quite a laugh—more a tired chuckle.

"I said her art is the best of the best."

A longer pause.

Then, at last:

"...Anyway, just send me your location already."

Yuu shook his head, half-smiling despite himself.

“Cheesecake and paranoia,” he muttered.

With a sigh, he tapped the "Send location" button and watched the little map pin shoot off into their chat.

There.

Deal made.

"Alright, I'll go there at 11 AM."

Yuu stared at the message.

Then typed:

"Can't we just go to WEEKEND GARAGE?"

He waited.

Nothing.

No reply.
Not even a "seen."

Yuu exhaled slowly, shoulders sagging.

"Haa... Akito, Akito…" he muttered under his breath, dragging a hand down his face. "You sure know how to piss me off sometimes."

With a resigned groan, he rolled off the bed and padded toward the door, the cool wooden floorboards creaking faintly beneath his feet. He stepped into the hallway, rubbing at his eyes, and made his way to the kitchen.

The scent of something faintly savory hung in the air—onions, soy, the comforting weight of morning miso.

His mother stood at the counter, her back to him, sleeves rolled up as she sliced green onions with practiced ease.

He leaned lightly against the doorframe. "Mom, do you have work today?"

She glanced over her shoulder, knife still in hand. "Hm? Yeah."

"When do you get a day off?"

She didn't miss a beat. "Tomorrow… and Monday."

"I see." Yuu nodded, slipping into a seat at the table with a quiet thump, arms crossed on the cool surface.

His mother gave him a brief glance—just enough to read the fatigue in his eyes—but said nothing.

For a moment, the kitchen was filled with the quiet rhythm of her chopping and the low hum of the fridge.

Normal.

Peaceful.

"By the way," Yuu said, resting his chin on his palm as he watched his mother portion miso into the pot. "A friend of mine is coming over."

She didn’t pause. “Oh? I see.” A small smile played on her lips. “Don’t worry, I won’t get in your way.”

Yuu scoffed lightly. “You’re not really getting in the way.”

There was a quiet beat as she stirred the broth.

“By the way,” she added, her voice lilting with casual curiosity, “when is Ichika-chan coming back?”

Yuu froze.

“Hah… seriously?”

“What?” she asked, completely unbothered, glancing over her shoulder with a smirk. “She’s an ideal keeper!”

“Mom…” he groaned, dragging a hand down his face.

She chuckled under her breath, the sound warm and amused.

Yuu exhaled sharply through his nose, then sat up straighter.

Time to activate the passive skill he’d perfected over the years.

[Skill Activated: Genius of Acting]

He laced his fingers together and gave a perfectly polite smile, eyes calm, voice disarmingly composed.

“Mom, I think I’d prefer focusing on my school first.”

His tone was so gentle, so convincingly dutiful, it could have won him a role in a primetime drama.

His mom gave him a side glance, clearly unconvinced, but she didn’t press further.

“Alright, alright,” she said, returning to the stove. “But just so you know, if she does come back, I’m making her lunch.”

Yuu let his head fall to the table with a dull thunk.

Breakfast passed in a quiet haze.

Yuu sat at the small kitchen table, slowly working his way through a plate of eggs and grilled fish while the muted sound of the stove hummed behind him.

The rice was warm, the miso comforting.

After finishing, he placed his dishes neatly in the sink, rinsed them with idle precision, and made his way into the living room.

The television flickered to life with a soft click of the remote.

The morning news murmured updates about the storm cleanup and transportation delays, accompanied by stock footage of flooded underpasses and reporters holding umbrellas.

Yuu slouched deeper into the couch, arms folded, head resting lightly against the back cushion. The quiet drone of the TV washed over him, not quite enough to keep him engaged but not boring enough to turn off.

Time trickled by.

Then—

Bzzzt.

His phone buzzed against the armrest beside him.

Yuu blinked, sat up slightly, and grabbed it with one hand. A notification lit up the screen.

I'm here.

Akito.

Yuu exhaled through his nose, more out of reflex than surprise. He stood from the couch, stretched his arms overhead, and walked toward the genkan.

His steps were slow, measured—not because he was tired, but because he could already imagine the smirk on Akito's face.

He unlocked the front door with a soft click and pulled it open.

There, standing just outside with a sling bag over one shoulder and a smug look already forming on his face, was Shinonome Akito.

“Yo,” Akito greeted, flashing a quick grin. “You better have those notes ready.”

Yuu deadpanned. “You better have that cheesecake.”

Akito raised a paper bag like a trophy. “Of course. I’m not a liar.”

Yuu stepped aside, gesturing lazily. “Then come in.."

Akito stepped inside, slipping off his shoes with practiced ease, as if he’d done it a hundred times before. His gaze flicked briefly around the entryway—simple, tidy, touched with warmth. The faint scent of fresh coffee still lingered in the air, and the gentle clatter of someone moving in the kitchen echoed faintly from down the hall.

Yuu turned to shut the door behind them.

Then—

“Oh?”

A familiar voice drifted from the hallway.

Yuu's mother appeared, already dressed for work. Her blazer was perfectly pressed, her hair pinned back in its usual low twist, and a sleek leather bag hung from her shoulder with effortless balance.

Yuu blinked. "Mother."

Her gaze landed on Akito, and her brows rose with polite curiosity that quickly shifted into recognition.

Akito straightened, instinctively adjusting his posture.

With a crisp, almost overly formal motion, he dipped into a respectful bow.

"Hello! Nice to meet you. I'm Akito Shinonome."

His tone was practiced, smooth, so polished it could've passed for a scene straight out of a daytime school drama.

Yuu stared blankly at the display, his brow twitching ever so slightly.

Uwah... Mr. Nice Guy, huh.

His mother smiled, warm and genuine. "Oh, you must be Yuu-kun's friend!"

Akito threw a casual grin toward Yuu, then nodded. "That's right. We're just going to have a small study session."

"Hah," Yuu muttered under his breath, unimpressed.

"Well then," she said, walking past them toward the door with her usual composed grace. "Take care of the house while I'm out, Yuu. And Akito-kun—make yourself at home, alright?"

"Thank you very much, ma'am."

She slipped on her heels at the genkan, the faint jingle of keys following her as she opened the front door. With a final glance over her shoulder and a motherly nod, she stepped out, shutting the door quietly behind her.

The house fell into a familiar stillness.

Yuu turned toward Akito, arms crossed and expression flat.

"You should teach me sometimes."

"What?"

"Nothing..."

"Anyway… Let's study in the living room."

Yuu turned on his heel, leading the way. Akito followed behind, hands stuffed lazily into the pockets of his hoodie, his steps relaxed and confident.

He moved through the hallway like he'd been there before, like he belonged, and for some reason, that only made the tension between Yuu's brows tighten a little more.

They reached the living room: modest, clean, and comfortably lived-in.

Pale sunlight spilled through the sheer curtains, casting golden bands across the tatami-patterned rug.

Yuu dropped onto the couch with a soft thud, limbs sprawling as he leaned back and stretched his legs under the table. The television played faint background chatter from an old morning news program—he reached for the remote and muted it with a click. Then, he grabbed the binder he'd left earlier.

Akito plopped down on the cushion with a practiced flop, sitting cross-legged. His bag landed beside him with a dull thump.

"You watch the news?" he asked, glancing at the paused screen.

"Of course. I'd like to know if the world's ending."

"Haa… You sound like an old man."

Yuu didn't bother responding to that. Instead, he cast a side-eye glance toward Akito.

"...You didn't even start, did you?"

Akito grinned without remorse. "That's what you're here for."

Yuu clicked his tongue. "You better be worth that slice of cheesecake."

Akito flashed a thumbs-up. "You'll get your sugar, don't worry. Now—teach me, oh wise honor student."

Yuu sighed and opened his notebook with a rustle. "Let's get this over with before I regret letting you in."

And yet, despite his words, the room had already softened around them.

It was easy—almost too easy. The atmosphere felt like the kind of Saturday you forget in detail but remember in feeling. The faint aroma of leftover coffee still lingered from the kitchen. Papers shuffled gently across the table. Sunlight filtered in warm and unbothered.

Yuu didn't even realize he was smiling faintly until—

"Oi," Akito said, raising a brow. "What's with that smug look?"

Yuu glanced over, "I'm imagining your reaction when I ask you to solve the first one alone."

Akito groaned and dropped his head dramatically onto the table. "Why are you like this?"

Yuu's smirk widened.

Maybe this Saturday wouldn't be so boring after all.

Then—

Buzz.

Yuu’s phone vibrated against the wooden surface.

He picked it up.

[Toya]
Hazuki-kun, is Akito there?

Yuu raised a brow as he read the message.

[Toya]
Hazuki-kun, is Akito there?

He tilted his phone slightly, then began typing.

[Yuu]
How did you know?

The reply came almost instantly.

[Toya]
...Well, you're the top scorer on the last exam. I figured if Akito was desperate enough, he'd crawl to you once I said no.

Yuu stared at the screen for a beat, lips twitching faintly.

“Hah… figures.”

He started typing again.

[Yuu]
Do you want in?

The typing bubble appeared… then vanished.

Appeared again.

Vanished.

Then finally:

[Toya]
Yeah. I have Kohane and An with me. They haven’t done the async work either.

Yuu sighed lightly through his nose, already hearing the chaos that would follow in his head.

[Yuu]
Alright. I’ll send my location.

He tapped the screen and sent the PIN.

Then leaned back and muttered under his breath, “So much for a quiet day.”

And then... an hour later.

Yuu's phone buzzed again.

He glanced at the notification, then stood up, Without a word, he stretched once, grabbed his phone, and started walking toward the front door.

Akito looked up from the worksheet he was halfway through scribbling on.

"Shinonome," Yuu called over his shoulder, "Stay there."

"Huh? Why? Are you going somewhere?"

"Just outside."

Akito blinked. "Okay…?"

He shrugged and went back to doodling in the margins of the math page, not thinking too much of it.

He didn't realize it yet.

Not until—

The front door clicked open.

And Yuu froze.

Standing on the other side of the threshold, just beyond the little patch of sunlight falling across the porch—

"Hello," Toya greeted politely, his tone soft and perfectly measured.

"Yo," An added with a grin, hands in the pockets of her jacket.

Beside her, Kohane offered a small, shy wave. "H-Hi, Hazuki-kun…"

Yuu blinked.

Then sighed.

"You brought the whole band."

"Come in," Yuu said, stepping aside.

"Pardon the intrusion," the three chorused in near-perfect unison, slipping off their shoes at the genkan with practiced ease.

Toya's movements were as precise as ever—calm, deliberate.

An, on the other hand, bounced slightly on her heels, glancing around with casual curiosity as she stepped in.

Kohane trailed just behind them, polite and quiet, her fingers nervously fidgeting with the hem of her sleeve.

Akito looked up from the table—and immediately froze.

His expression tightened, first in confusion, then in growing irritation.

“What the hell are you guys doing here?” he asked, eyes narrowing.

Toya met his gaze with equal sharpness.

“I could ask you the same thing,” he replied coolly, not bothering to hide the edge in his tone.

The air between them tensed—familiar, brittle, and just a little too easy to ignite.

Yuu let out a sigh as he followed them in.

“Don’t start,” he said flatly, flopping back onto the couch like this was all just another minor inconvenience. “It’s a study group. Apparently.”

An plopped herself down on the armrest beside him, grinning. “Well, it was a group effort getting here. Toya was being all formal in the group chat, and Kohane looked like she was about to chicken out—so I dragged them both.”

“I wasn’t going to chicken out…” Kohane mumbled under her breath, cheeks turning pink as she settled onto the cushion.

Toya stayed standing for a moment longer, arms crossed, his gaze flicking between Yuu and Akito as if trying to decide which one was more at fault for this situation.

Akito scoffed, leaning back and crossing his arms. “You could’ve at least told me.”

“I didn’t know they’d actually come,” Yuu replied without missing a beat. “Toya just said ‘Is Akito there’—not ‘we’re on the way.’”

Despite the brewing tension, the room wasn’t cold.

If anything, it felt like the start of something oddly… natural.

Even if no one was quite ready to admit it yet.

And so, the study group began—somewhat unexpectedly—with Yuu at the helm.

He stood by the low table, binder propped open like a makeshift lecture stand, pointing to key formulas and diagramming examples with calm precision.

His explanations were clear, concise, and strangely engaging, almost like a seasoned tutor who’d been doing this for years.

Toya followed along in perfect rhythm, nodding occasionally, jotting down notes with quiet efficiency. It was clear he didn’t need much guidance—just affirmation. Every now and then, he’d even complete a sentence before Yuu could finish, earning him a subtle glance of acknowledgment.

The other three, however…

Akito groaned for the fifth time, forehead pressed dramatically against his notebook.

An looked like she was trying to focus, but her doodles were slowly taking over the margins of her worksheet.

Kohane kept fidgeting with her pen, eyebrows knit in concentration as she reread the same sentence over and over.

Yuu pinched the bridge of his nose, sighing.

Two hours passed.

Finally, with a long, drawn-out yawn, he leaned back and shut his notebook with a soft thump.

“Alright,” he said, rubbing his eyes, “Break time.”

As if on cue, the three collectively slumped over the table.

An flopped backward with a groan, arms spread wide. “Ughhh, my brain’s turning into jelly.”

Akito stretched both arms over his head and cracked his neck. “How do you make this stuff sound so easy?”

Kohane let out a tiny breath of relief, stretching her arms above her head with a quiet, “Thank goodness…”

Toya calmly sipped from the glass of water he’d poured earlier, not looking tired in the slightest.

Yuu glanced at him, deadpan. “You didn’t need help at all.”

Toya nodded. “It was still helpful.”

“…Hearing that from you feels unfair.”

Akito reached over and flicked Yuu’s shoulder. “Just accept the compliment, smartass.”

Yuu sighed again, but his lips tugged into a faint smile.

The tension had thinned. The house was filled with voices, quiet laughter, and a lazy kind of warmth. It wasn’t just a study session anymore.

It was starting to feel like something else.

Like friends.

“Fufu~ I feel like Hazuki-kun is older than us,” Kohane said softly, brushing a loose strand of hair behind her ear. Her voice was gentle, admiring, the kind that didn’t seek to flatter but simply voiced what was felt.

Yuu blinked, caught off guard. “I… am your classmate.”

“But you don’t act like it,” An added with a grin, leaning forward on her elbows and giving him a playful look. “As expected of Kamiyama High’s Top 1.”

“Don’t exaggerate,” Yuu muttered, shaking his head. His tone stayed flat, but the way his fingers lightly drummed against the table betrayed a quiet, reluctant amusement.

“It’s not exaggerating if it’s true,” Kohane chimed in, her hands folded neatly over her notebook. “You helped me understand that last formula faster than any teacher ever did…”

Yuu looked away slightly, tilting his head as if to shake off the compliment. Praise never quite sat right with him—it felt undeserved, like wearing a shirt a size too large. He wasn’t sure what to do with it, so he simply let it pass, unclaimed.

Across the table, Akito squinted at him, arms crossed.

There was a flicker of something unreadable in his eyes.

Then Yuu turned his gaze to Toya.

“More importantly, Aoyagi-san. You should take a break.”

Toya looked up from his notes, brows lifted slightly. “I’m fine. I can go on.”

Yuu narrowed his eyes. “How stubborn of you.”

“It’s not stubbornness,” Toya replied smoothly. “I just don’t want to lose my focus.”

“Same thing in this context,” Yuu countered, his tone still calm but edged with a hint of dry disapproval.

Akito chuckled under his breath. “He’s got you there, Toya.”

Toya looked between them, then let out a small exhale through his nose—a quiet concession, if not a verbal one.

Yuu leaned back, the faintest smile tugging at the edge of his mouth.

For all their differences, this strange little gathering… wasn’t so bad after all.

He glanced at the time glowing on his phone screen—1:04 PM.

“We’ll continue around two,” Yuu said, closing his notebook with a soft thud. The gesture wasn’t commanding, but it left little room for debate. Firm, casual, like a bookmark placed between chapters.

No one protested.

Kohane let out a quiet exhale of relief, arms stretching high over her head until her shoulders popped. “Thank goodness… I think my brain’s overheating.”

An flopped backwards into the couch, limbs sprawled like she’d just finished running a marathon. “Same. I haven’t studied this hard since… ever.”

Akito was already collapsed face-down into the table cushion, muttering something too muffled to make out, likely a curse aimed at math or life.

Toya, always more composed, set his pen down with care and gave a single nod. “Alright.”

Yuu stood up, rolling his shoulders as he stretched. A satisfying crack followed, echoed by the soft creak of the floor beneath his feet.

The kitchen beckoned just a few steps away, bathed in soft afternoon light. The air still carried faint traces of old coffee and quiet warmth—a domestic stillness that settled beneath the surface.

“I’ll get us something to drink,” he said, already halfway to the kitchen.

A beat passed before Akito called out lazily behind him. “Oi—” He held up a paper bag from earlier. “Make sure it’s chilled.”

Yuu turned just enough to glance over his shoulder, and then grabbed the paper bag putting it on the fridge.

In the kitchen, he moved with calm efficiency, placing glasses on a tray, fishing out chilled oolong tea from the fridge for the others, and brewing a fresh batch of black coffee for Toya, who he already knew wouldn’t go for anything sweet or fruity.

The scent of roasted beans mixed with the gentle clink of ice cubes, a small symphony of small comforts.

It really did feel like a normal weekend.

Laughter in the living room. Pages rustling. Friends—not quite close, but not strangers anymore—resting in the quiet hours between study and whatever came next.

It felt ordinary.

Natural.

Yuu stared briefly at the tray of drinks, then carried it back with steady hands and an unreadable expression.

equation or mutter something under their breath—but even that felt subdued. The mood had changed.

Focused.

Steady.

Maybe it was the tea. Or the gentle lull of the afternoon winding into dusk. Maybe it was the quiet motivation of seeing Yuu’s pages already filled in—precise, efficient, unnervingly clean.

Or maybe… it was just the comfort of not working alone for once.

Time drifted like a slow current.

Outside, Shibuya stirred beyond the glass—its heartbeat distant.

Traffic whispered down side streets, sandals clicked softly on pavement, and the faint chirp of summer insects returned after the storm’s long absence.

The sky dimmed by degrees, clouds rolling back to reveal the indigo edge of evening. By the time the last worksheet was set down and the final sigh escaped someone's lips, the only light in the room came from the soft glow of a floor lamp and the ambient blue cast of the idle television screen.

Night had arrived quietly.

Toya stood first, straightening the sleeves of his uniform with his usual quiet precision. He looked toward Yuu, gaze calm, almost thoughtful.

"Thanks for having us."

Yuu, still lounging on the couch, barely glanced up. He raised a hand in a half-wave. "No worries."

One by one, they gathered their things.

Kohane bowed her head politely.

An gave a lazy salute.

Akito muttered something about owing him a second slice of cheesecake, though it was hard to tell if he was joking.

The front door opened, and the night air slipped in—cool, carrying the faint scent of wet earth.

Yuu stayed on the couch.

He listened as the footsteps faded down the street, then reached for the remote with one hand and settled back into the cushions.

He blinked at the screen.

"...Oh. Great timing..."

The logo shimmered onscreen in soft pink and gold.

MORE MORE JUMP!

He sank a little deeper into the couch.

Just as Yuu settled back into the couch, eyes half-lidded as he watched the shimmer of pastel lights across the screen—MORE MORE JUMP!'s performance in full bloom—a voice startled him out of his reverie.

"Uhh… Hazuki-kun."

He flinched slightly. "Wha—?"

Turning around, he found Kohane, standing by the doorway, a small, apologetic smile on her face. Her school bag hung loosely off one shoulder, and her fingers nervously tapped against the strap.

"Azusawa-san? I didn't notice you there."

"Sorry," she said with a quiet laugh, stepping further into the room. "I forgot something."

She crossed toward the low table and retrieved a small case she'd left behind—one of the pouches for her stationery. As she reached for it, her gaze flicked to the television, then back at Yuu, a teasing glint forming in her eyes.

"But still…" She smiled. "I didn't expect you to be into idols. You really are a boy, huh."

Yuu flushed, caught mid-sip of his drink. "Haha… I mean—I'm interested in their music, so…"

"Really?" she asked, stepping closer with casual interest. "Actually, I have a best friend in MORE MORE JUMP!. If you want, I could introduce you sometime."

"E–Eh? No, no, no—I'm fine. Perfectly fine."

His voice pitched higher than usual, his tone far more defensive than he intended. His calm exterior —normally impenetrable—shattered like glass hit by a stray pebble.

Kohane blinked at him, eyebrows raised. "R–Really…?"

"Yes!" he insisted, nodding a little too fast. "Actually, since you've got your case now, how about I… send you home?"

She giggled softly. "No need. Toya's waiting for me outside."

"R-Right. Of course."

"Thanks again. Take care, Hazuki-kun!"

And with that, she offered a small wave and disappeared down the hall.

As soon as she was out of sight, Yuu slumped back into the couch, dragging a hand across his face.

"Ugh…"

He stared up at the ceiling for a moment, wondering how a single offer of an idol meet-and-greet could have reduced him to this.

Chapter End Notes

FAQ (Frequently Asked Questions and probably some questions that will be asked in the future)

1. Do the characters know that there are other SEKAIs
A: No, only the Virtual Singers are aware of other Sekais, except Ichika, who only knows one SEKAI, which is (The non-existence SEKAI). The rest are still unaware.

2. Does Ichika know she's a game character?
A: No.

3. Is Yuu a college student or a high school student
A: Yuu is a college student in the actual world, but inside the PJSK, he's a high schooler (So

it's like he has the perk of a college mindset with the body of a high schooler.)

4. Is Yuu trapped in the game permanently?
A: Not permanently (as far as we know). He’s trying to find a way out while fulfilling a mysterious role that involves repairing the broken connections between SEKAIs and helping glitching Virtual Singer (Miku).

5. Will other characters find out about the glitching SEKAI or Yuu’s mission?
A: Possibly. Ichika already knows, due to Miku telling her, that more people might be pulled into the truth.

6. Is this an OC x Character story, / Will there be romance?
A: There are subtle hints of connection, but romance isn’t the main focus (yet).

7. What is Yuu's role in each SEKAI? Is he just watching?
A: At first, he tried to remain a background character. But gradually, each group starts pulling him into their world. He becomes a silent observer, supporter, and eventually… something more.

8. Does Yuu know he's in a rhythm game?
A: Yes. He's fully aware he’s inside Project SEKAI and even uses the rhythm interface in-universe to "grind songs" and unlock paths.

9. Is Yuu OP?
A: Not exactly. Yuu has an advantage because he knows the mechanics, character stories, and even has the skill tree. "Emotionally", he struggles deeply. His knowledge can’t fix everything, and sometimes, it even makes things harder.

If you have any more questions about the series or my writing, feel free to ask, cause I'd be looking at them and answer them! (BUT... Do not ask for a spoiler plot, cause I won't be answering them.)

Chapter 20: Mere Coincidence (Part 1)

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

It was Sunday.

The storm had passed, leaving the city rinsed clean in the soft gold of early sunlight. Shibuya, reborn beneath the warmth, bustled with weekend life. Couples strolled hand-in-hand beneath storefront awnings, families meandered between cafés with takeout cups in hand, and the sound of a distant busker's guitar mingled with the hum of conversation under the mall's towering glass canopy.

In the central plaza of the shopping mall—an open, airy space crowned by sunbeams and ringed with banners fluttering gently in the breeze—Yuu Hazuki sat alone on a bench.

He barely moved.

His posture was casual: elbows resting loosely on his knees, back slightly hunched, the fingers of one hand slowly curling against the palm of the other. His expression was unreadable—half-focused, half-distant.

Around him, life went on.

Children's laughter rang out from the nearby play area.

A group of teenagers passed ,by arguing cheerfully over which crêpe stall to visit.

An elderly man took a seat at the far end of the same bench with a weary sigh, adjusting the bag on his shoulder.

But none of it reached Yuu.

Not really.

Because what he saw—what he focused on—wasn't there.

Not to anyone else, at least.

Floating in front of him, just inches from his face, was a glowing, semi-transparent holographic screen.

It shimmered faintly in the light, flickering like a mirage caught between realities.

Lines of text and diagrams scrolled slowly across its surface: maps, branching quest trees, blinking nodes marked with question marks or faded icons.

With a subtle swipe of his fingers through empty air, the display responded, zooming in on a small icon labeled "Upcoming Event: Handshake – MORE MORE JUMP!"

Yuu narrowed his eyes slightly.

“Let’s see…” he muttered under his breath, flipping through the data with practiced ease.

To anyone watching, he just looked like a person spacing out, perhaps lost in thought.

But in truth, Yuu was tampering with his Project Sekai UI, a world layered beneath the one everyone else saw—a system draped invisibly across reality, equal parts game and simulation.

Ever since he had stepped into Project Sekai, it had never fully left him.

He could feel it now, like a second heartbeat: subtle, constant, and waiting.

Skill menus.

Progression trees.

Stage Selects

With a final flick, the interface collapsed.

The holographic light faded like steam into the air, leaving only the shine of polished tile and the passing shadows of shoppers above him.

Yuu leaned back with a soft sigh, eyes trailing up to the ceiling.

“So far, the Virtual singers are taking their time finding Glitching Miku."

But he wasn’t here for a glitch.

Not today.

His gaze returned to the entryway at the far end of the plaza, where a row of velvet ropes and cardboard signs had begun to form a queue.

On the largest poster stood the sparkling logo of MORE MORE JUMP!

And below it:
“Special Meet & Greet – Handshake Event Today! Starts at 2:00 PM.”

Yuu blinked once, long and slow.

Then he stood up, brushing nonexistent dust from his jeans.

“…Let’s get this over with.” <--- Secretly Excited

Yuu quietly stepped to the end of the line.

The velvet ropes cordoning off the event area led into a neat coil, winding patiently toward the center platform.

The crowd was lively but respectful—chatter bubbling like soda fizz beneath the mall's high ceiling. S

Students in uniform. Adults with tote bags.

Cosplayers in pastel skirts and satin jackets proudly embroidered with their oshi's name in glitter.

Every few feet, someone clutched a penlight or nervously rehearsed their greeting under their breath.

A girl in front of Yuu flipped through a small photo book, her lips moving silently as if mouthing a prayer.

Two boys behind him debated which MMJ song made them cry the most.

And in the midst of it all… Yuu stood quietly.

No merch.

No fan badge.

No practiced lines.

Just himself—expression calm, hands in his jacket pockets, gaze fixed on the booth up ahead.

He didn't look like a fan. He didn't try to.

Yet somehow, he didn't stand out.

The line moved slowly.

From behind the partition wall, faint voices spilled into the air—soft, bubbly laughter, warm greetings, the occasional rustle of costume fabric.

Stage staff moved with efficiency, guiding fans forward one by one.

Yuu exhaled slowly, his eyes narrowing as he observed the layout—four chairs behind a white-draped table, staff stationed nearby, security keeping an easy distance.

The idols hadn't appeared yet. But the atmosphere was undeniably real.

MORE MORE JUMP.

To others, they were idols.

To Yuu, they were pieces of a world not entirely false, but not entirely true either.

A world that smiled too brightly.

A world built on glitter, applause, and unreachable dreams.

A world he had walked through.

A world that Miku once showed him.

He lowered his gaze.

"Still… that's not up to me to decide, is it?" he thought.

The line grew shorter.

Then shorter still.

Until—

“Hello!”

Her voice was soft and airy, like a breeze in spring.

Yuu’s head lifted.

And there she was.

Hinomori Shizuku.

Up close, she looked exactly as he remembered.

Long, wavy pale-blue hair cascaded over her shoulders, strands framing her face just enough to soften the edges.

Her light blue eyes shone under the event lights—clear, kind, and just the tiniest bit distant.

A beauty mark nestled near the right corner of her lips, accenting her already delicate features.

For a moment, Yuu simply looked at her.

My heart’s… actually racing?

That single thought flickered through his head before muscle memory kicked in.

[Skill Activated: Genius of Acting]

His posture straightened slightly. His expression softened into something warm but restrained.

The perfect polite fan.

“Hello,” he returned, voice calm, just the right pitch of enthusiasm.

Their hands met in the brief handshake, a practiced motion, carefully timed.

Shizuku’s palm was light and warm against his.

“Thank you for supporting us!” she said with a bright, practiced smile.

But there was no falseness in it.

Only the gentleness of someone who had learned to make others feel seen in a few short seconds.

Yuu nodded. “Your song helped someone I know. So… thank you.”

He didn’t say more.

He didn’t need to.

Shizuku blinked once, as if surprised, but her smile didn't falter. If anything, it grew just a little softer.

"Then I'm glad," she said.

And just like that, it was over.

The staff gently gestured for him to move along.

But as Yuu stepped forward, he caught a glimpse past Shizuku, toward the others seated further down the line.

Next up…

Hanasato Minori.

Next in line sat a girl with shoulder-length light brown hair, neatly kept and worn loose, with soft blunt bangs framing her bright, open face. Her light grey eyes shimmered like morning dew—earnest, curious, and filled with a warmth that seemed to reach out before her hand ever did.

Hanasato Minori.

She looked up the moment Yuu stepped forward, her smile lighting up in an instant.

"Hello!" she chirped, her tone cheerful, full of the natural energy that made her stand out even in a crowd of performers.

Yuu smiled gently back, extending his hand across the table. "Hello," he returned, voice polite and steady.

Their hands met briefly.

Warm, light pressure. The kind of handshake that held no reservation, no pretense. Just sincerity.

She was shorter than he expected.

And maybe a little more real, up close.

Minori's eyes flicked up to meet his, her smile never wavering. "Thank you so much for coming today!"

"I should be thanking you," Yuu replied with the same calm demeanor. "You've worked hard."

It wasn't a line.

He meant it.

From the performances to the behind-the-scenes clips, he'd watch MMJ's story in the game, it was obvious—Minori wasn't the most gifted, but she was certainly the most determined.

Optimistic to a fault.

Hard-working beyond what most could maintain.

The kind of girl who didn't just chase dreams, she built the ladder to reach them.

For a brief moment, Minori's eyes widened.

Then her smile softened, her fingers tightening slightly around his.

"…That means a lot," she said, quieter than before. "Really."

Another staff member signaled gently.

Time to move.

Minori released his hand with a small wave. "Keep cheering for us, okay?"

Yuu gave a short nod, stepping away from the table and taking in a slow breath.

Two down.

And next… stood someone who needed no introduction.

Kiritani Haruka.

The next girl sat with a composed posture, her fingers laced neatly in front of her on the table.

Compared to the bubbly warmth of Minori, she radiated something cooler, more refined.

Short, neatly trimmed blue hair, with swept bangs that framed her forehead and brushed just above her brows.

Her light blue eyes were calm, discerning, watching the line with the quiet poise of someone used to stages, cameras, and expectations. Not cold—just measured.

Yuu stepped forward.

She looked up to meet his gaze, and for a moment, there was a flicker of something—subtle recognition? Curiosity?

"Hello," she said, her voice clear and professional, yet not unfriendly. "Thank you for coming today."

The former model.

The idol who had once stood alone in the spotlight, but now sang alongside others.

The producer of MORE MORE JUMP—both on and off the stage.

Yuu offered his hand with a soft smile. "You're more impressive in person than I imagined."

There was no flattery in his voice, just a kind of quiet respect.

Haruka blinked once, then gave the faintest of smiles. It was a small thing.

But genuine.

“Is that so?” she said, slipping her hand into his for a light, practiced shake. “I hope we continue to live up to that impression.”

“You already do,” he answered simply.

Their handshake ended quickly, professionally, almost businesslike.

But in those few seconds, there was an understanding passed between them.

One performer to another.

Yuu could see it clearly now—she wasn’t just performing.

She was orchestrating.

The light blue eyes watched him carefully as he moved on, as if quietly assessing him long after he let go.

And ahead of him, the final member waited.

She was unmistakable even before he reached her.

With cerise-colored eyes brimming with energy and coral pink hair that fell in lively waves past her shoulders, Momoi Airi practically lit up the space around her.

Two soft, fluffy pigtails bounced slightly as she leaned forward, waving both hands in an eager blur.

“Hi hi! Thanks for coming!!” she greeted, voice full of spark and showmanship. “You excited? Nervous? Ooh—did you practice what to say before this?”

Yuu blinked, momentarily caught off-guard by the sheer force of her presence.

It wasn’t overwhelming.

It was… bright. Infectious. The kind of charm that made you forget your lines, forget your worries.

He offered his hand, his smile tilting faintly. “Hello,” he replied calmly, “And no—I didn’t rehearse anything.”

“Whaaat? You’re one of those cool types, huh?” Airi grinned as she took his hand in both of hers instead of just one, shaking with comical enthusiasm. “Trying to be mysterious~?”

“Not really. I just figured I’d talk like a normal person.”

“Pfft—boring answer, but I respect it!”

Her laughter rang out, unfiltered and real.

Yuu couldn’t help but chuckle softly himself, the corners of his lips tugging upward despite his best efforts to keep composed.

Airi gave him a wink as she let go. “Well, even if you didn’t plan anything to say, I hope this was fun!”

“It was,” he said, nodding. “You’ve got a lot of energy.”

“Gotta match the fans, right?” she beamed.

The staff waved subtly from the side again; his time was up.

Yuu stepped back, hands in his pockets now. “Thanks for the handshake, Momoi-san.”

Airi’s smile softened just a touch. “Come see us again sometime, yeah?”

He gave a nod, turning away as the next fan in line stepped forward.

As he walked out of the velvet-rope maze, the buzz of the crowd still humming behind him, Yuu let out a breath he hadn’t realized he was holding.

More More Jump… even knowing they were from a SEKAI, even knowing they weren’t real in the traditional sense—

Their presence felt real.

Their smiles, their words, the way they made people feel, it all mattered.

And for just a brief moment, Yuu found himself understanding why people loved idols so much.

Not because they were perfect.

But because they tried to be.

That effort might just be enough to move someone.

Even him.

“Huh? Hazuki-kun, what are you doing here?”

The voice was familiar—gentle, surprised.

Yuu turned instinctively, his expression tightening ever so slightly the moment he recognized her.

“Kohane…”

She stood just a few paces away,

Her hair was tied up today, a loose ponytail swaying behind her as she stepped closer, brows raised in amusement.

“Ahh~ This must be the handshake event, right?”

Yuu cleared his throat, face neutral. “Coincidence.”

“Eh? Really?” She tilted her head, an unconvinced smile curling at her lips.

[Warning: Genius of Acting is wavering. Automatic deactivation imminent.]

HUH?! You can’t just bail on me now!

Yuu mentally screamed, eyes widening ever so slightly as panic tickled the edge of his calm.

“A-anyway,” he said quickly, changing the subject, “what about you? What are you doing here?”

“Me?” Kohane blinked, then brightened. “Ah! I’m here for Minori. I told you yesterday that I have a friend from MORE MORE JUMP, remember?”

“R-Right,” Yuu nodded. “I see…”

There was a brief pause. Kohane glanced past him toward the event space, then back again.

“But still…” she said, leaning in with a teasing look, “you really don’t have to deny it, you know? They’re cute!”

Yuu turned his gaze away, jaw tightening. A soft puff of breath escaped him.

“I’m not denying anything,” he mumbled.

Kohane just giggled.

“Mm-hmm. Sure.”

The noise of the plaza continued around them—banners fluttering in the air-conditioning draft, soft idol music playing on a nearby speaker, fans still moving through the queue like a steady stream.

But to Yuu, all of it felt muted now, faded into the background.

Because, for some reason, facing idols on a stage was one thing—

But standing here, caught by Kohane Azusawa, felt like the real performance was finally over.

And he wasn’t sure if that was comforting…

Or terrifying.

“Anyway,” Yuu said, brushing a hand through his bangs as he turned slightly away, “since I’m done with my goal, I’m heading home now.”

“Eh? Leaving already?” Kohane pouted, taking a half-step forward.

“Yeah.”

“Then hang out with me!”

“I’m busy.”

Kohane’s eyes sparkled with sudden mischief. “Then I’ll tell everyone you went to visit MORE MORE JUMP.”

Yuu froze mid-step.

The mere idea of that leaking out—

Akito’s smug grin.

An’s teasing smirk.

Toya’s quiet, judgmental silence.

He winced.

“You wouldn’t.”

“I would.”

A beat passed.

He glanced at her.

She was grinning ear to ear, clearly enjoying the shift in power.

“Fine,” he muttered. “You win this time.”

“Hehe~”

Kohane-chan… you’re getting bolder, huh?

And just like that, Yuu stayed behind.

Dragged not by obligation—

—but by the tiniest, most reluctant tug of amusement in his chest.

Chapter End Notes

I have a question for you guys... How did you end up in this book? Was it recommended, or the Front page? or...?

Chapter 21: Mere Coincidence (Part 2)

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

They ended up walking side by side through the mall, the crowd thinning as the golden haze of late afternoon settled over Shibuya.

Warm light streamed in from the upper skylights, casting long shadows across the polished floor tiles.

The air buzzed with a soft, aimless energy, casual chatter from passersby, the clinking of dishes from nearby cafés, and the faint echo of music from overhead mall speakers looping seasonal jingles.

Kohane clutched a slim paper bag of MORE MORE JUMP merch close to her chest, her steps light with a kind of quiet contentment.

Occasionally, she tilted her head to glance up at Yuu beside her.

“So,” she said playfully, voice half-hushed in the way friends talk when they’re just killing time, “where are we going?”

Yuu slid his hands into the pockets of his jacket, eyes scanning the way ahead. “You’re the one who dragged me into this. Shouldn’t you be the one with a plan?”

“Nope,” she replied with a grin. “I just wanted to see where you’d take me.”

He exhaled, half a sigh, half a laugh. “There’s a small café on the second floor. Quiet, decent drinks. Not too crowded.”

“Perfect,” she chirped, matching his pace.

They rode the escalator in companionable silence. It wasn’t awkward. Just... still. The kind of stillness that settled naturally between two people who didn’t feel the need to fill every moment with conversation.

Soon, they found themselves in a tucked-away café at the far end of the second floor.

Wooden panels lined the walls, warm ambient lighting cast a soft amber hue across every surface, and the scent of roasted beans lingered pleasantly in the air.

A low hum of lo-fi music played in the background, blending seamlessly with the occasional hiss of the espresso machine.

Yuu led them to a table near the window, a cozy booth partially shaded by a hanging potted plant.

Outside the window, the city glowed gently in the approaching dusk, streaks of orange and violet painting the sky beyond.

Kohane slid into her seat and set down her bag, brushing a strand of hair behind her ear. “You come here often?”

“Nope.”

“Then I’ll treat you today,” she said, already reaching for the small tablet menu.

Yuu raised an eyebrow. “Why?”

“You helped me with studying, remember?” She smiled. “Consider this a late thank-you.”

He leaned back in his seat, the sunlight slanting in across his face as he tilted his head toward the window. He didn’t say anything more.

But this… this wasn’t bad.

Not at all.

After ordering drinks—a simple iced latte for Kohane, black coffee for Yuu—they sat in easy stillness for a moment.

“You said you’re waiting for your friend from MMJ, right?” Yuu asked, breaking the quiet.

“Yeah,” she nodded, taking a sip of her drink. “Minori-chan. But the event’s probably still running. She said she’d text me after.”

“I see.”

There was a pause.

The hum of the café softened the edges of the silence between them.

For once, Yuu let himself relax.

“So?” Yuu asked, resting his chin lightly on his knuckles. “How did you two become friends?”

Kohane blinked, caught a little off guard by the question. “Minori-chan and I…? Well…”

Yuu didn’t interrupt. He simply watched her with a calm, unreadable expression—though behind his neutral gaze, he already knew the answer.

It was information he had picked up long ago, tucked somewhere between rhythm battles and character episodes.

Still, he was curious to hear her version.

Her words.

“We were each other’s first friend,” she said softly, her fingers fiddling with the edge of her cup. “We started talking then... I guess we started hangout outside of school."

Yuu gave a small nod. “Ohh… What school do you go to again?”

“Miyamasuzaka Girls Academy.”

“Ah. So it’s an all-girls school, huh…”

He said it without much inflection, but there was a faint trace of teasing behind the words. Not quite a smirk, but close.

Kohane laughed sheepishly. “Y-Yeah, I guess that surprises people sometimes…”

“Not really,” Yuu replied, glancing toward the window. “You seem like someone who’d do well in a place like that.”

“Huh? Is that a compliment?”

“I’m not sure,” he said, sipping from his coffee. “Take it how you will.”

Kohane pouted, but the smile tugging at her lips betrayed no real irritation.

The sunlight outside softened as clouds began to roll in again, casting a diffused glow across the café’s wooden tables. Their drinks sat between them, slowly emptying as time passed—not rushed, not idle.

Just quietly shared.

The café's ambient music shifted to a mellow acoustic tune, the soft hum of conversation blending with the gentle clinking of cups and spoons. Kohane took another sip of her iced latte, her fingers now relaxed around the cool glass.

“…I guess it’s kind of strange,” she said after a pause, her eyes drifting toward the window. “Minori-chan’s such a bright person. She shines onstage, always has this energy… but when we’re together, she’s really down-to-earth. She listens, you know?”

Yuu tilted his head slightly, watching her speak, not interrupting, just quietly observing the way her voice softened.

“Sometimes, I wonder if I’m keeping up with her,” Kohane admitted, her smile small but sincere. “Like… I’m still catching up to where she already is.”

Yuu leaned back in his chair, fingers laced behind his head. “That sounds familiar.”

“Hm?”

“You’re talking about her,” he said, “the same way the others talk about you.”

Kohane blinked.

“The quiet one who ended up keeping pace with An, Akito, Toya… and somehow made them all try harder without realizing it.”

Her cheeks turned faintly pink. “I-I don’t think that’s true…”

“You can think what you want,” Yuu replied, eyes closing for a moment. “But you’re underestimating how people see you.”

Kohane fidgeted slightly with the straw in her drink, visibly flustered now. “Hazuki-kun… you say things so bluntly.”

“I’m just honest,” he said, opening his eyes again. “That’s all.”

Before she could respond, a soft ding came from her phone.

Kohane looked down, unlocking it with a swipe.

“Ah!”

Yuu glanced over. “What?”

“It’s from Minori-chan!” she said brightly. “She just finished the event and said she’s coming to meet me here!”

“Coming here?”

“Yep! She said she’s already on the escalator—” Kohane paused, then added in a tiny voice, “I-I didn’t think she’d come all the way up…”

Yuu arched an eyebrow. “You're surprised your idol friend is acting like a friend?”

“I mean, it’s Minori-chan! She’s busy!”

He gave a shrug, then stood up and grabbed his cup. “Guess I’ll be going then.”

“Eh? Why?”

“I’ve seen enough MMJ for one day.”

Kohane puffed her cheeks. “That’s not fair, you were smiling during their performance.”

“I have no memory of that,” Yuu replied calmly, already turning toward the counter.

Kohane watched him go, half-pouting, half-laughing.

Outside the café window, the clouds continued to shift gently, casting long, dappled shadows across the tiled floor.

And just down the hallway, the sound of light footsteps approached.

Just as Yuu reached for the empty tray, a familiar voice rang out from behind.

“Huh? I–It’s you!”

He froze.

Yuu slowly turned around, half-expecting the voice to be directed at someone else.

But when he glanced over his shoulder, there she was, bright-eyed and smiling.

Minori Hanasato.

She pointed toward him in delight. “Yeah! I didn’t expect to see you here!”

Yuu blinked.

Why is it always like this…?

Before he could respond, Kohane suddenly jumped up from her seat.

“Minori-chan!” she called, waving enthusiastically.

“Kohane-chan, you’re here!” Minori’s eyes lit up even more. She hurried over, the two girls meeting near the table with an excited energy that changed the air.

Yuu cleared his throat lightly, retreating a step. “Azusawa-san, I’ll get going now…”

“Oh? Already?” Kohane glanced back, but didn’t stop him.

“Yeah.” He turned slightly, hand raised in a half-wave. “Enjoy your time.”

“Wait—” Minori stepped forward again, looking as if she had more to say, but Yuu had already begun to walk toward the exit.

“Don’t worry, Minori-chan,” Kohane said with a small giggle. “That’s just how he is.”

Minori tilted her head. “He’s… interesting.”

Kohane smiled, watching Yuu’s figure disappear down the corridor. “Yeah… but he’s a good person.”

Back at the café entrance, Yuu sighed quietly, slipping his hands into his pockets.

His footsteps echoed softly as he made his way out of sight, the faint sunlight catching the edge of his expression—

A smile.

Subtle.

But real.

Footsteps echoed softly against the polished tiles beneath his shoes, mingling with the low murmur of weekend shoppers and the occasional laughter of passing couples.

The air was tinged with the scent of fresh pastries and brewing coffee from the nearby cafés, blending seamlessly with the mellow sunlight filtering through the glass ceilings above.

He exhaled, adjusting the strap of his bag, and prepared to head toward the station.

But then—

A presence.

From across the corridor, a pair of sharp eyes met his.

The moment held.

Brief.

Pointed.

“Geh… It’s you.”

The flat, distinctly unamused voice cut through the air like a cold blade.

Yuu blinked, mildly startled. “Hinomori-san,” he greeted, his tone instinctively polite as he straightened his posture.

Shiho Hinomori stood several steps away, arms folded across her chest, her expression the embodiment of deadpan irritation.

“Don’t call me so casually."

Beside her, another figure turned at the sound of his voice—this one much softer in demeanor, her presence like a breeze through spring trees.

“Huh? It’s you!” Shizuku Hinomori, radiant as ever, smiled and gave a graceful little wave.

Her long, wavy blue hair shimmered in the light as it swayed gently behind her, and her light blue eyes shimmered with easy recognition.

“H-Hello…” Yuu replied, caught off guard. There was a moment of disbelief on his face—how many run-ins could fate really cram into one weekend?

Shizuku looked between her sister and Yuu with mild curiosity. “You two know each other?”

“No, we don’t,” Shiho answered flatly before Yuu could say a word.

“Really?” Shizuku tilted her head, eyes narrowing slightly as if inspecting him. “But I thought I recognized you during the handshake event!”

He scratched the back of his neck awkwardly. “So I was that obvious, huh…”

Shizuku giggled softly. “You were the only one not holding merch. That kind of made you stand out—but in a good way.”

Shiho rolled her eyes and looked off to the side, clearly uninterested. “Figures. Just some weirdo fan who wants to hold idols’ hands.”

Yuu gave a dry laugh, more out of defense than amusement. “That’s… not exactly it.”

Shizuku beamed, finding the exchange amusing. “Fate’s funny like that, don’t you think?”

“Let’s go already, Onee-chan,” Shiho muttered, already stepping forward. “We’re going to be late.”

“Ah, right, right,” Shizuku nodded. She turned one last time toward Yuu, her voice gentle. “Still, it was nice seeing you again.”

Yuu nodded, his hand raising slightly in farewell. “Likewise.”

As the sisters passed him, their footsteps fading into the crowd, he caught one last snippet of Shizuku's voice drifting back toward him:

"You're friends with Kohane-chan too, right?"

Shiho muttered something low and grumbly in reply—indecipherable, but definitely annoyed.

And then they were gone, their silhouettes swallowed up by the mall's slow, swaying current of movement.

Yuu stood there for a moment longer, watching them vanish into the crowd. A soft breeze from the building's ventilation brushed his face as he let out a long sigh.

"I'm starting to think I'm not the background character I thought I was…" he muttered.

Shouldering his bag once more, Yuu resumed walking, this time with quieter steps, but sharper awareness.

"Ahh... I want to go home."

Before he could encounter anyone else—any more idols, classmates, or coincidental reunions—Yuu turned on his heel and made a swift retreat.

No hesitation.

No detour.

Just a straight line toward the station, and then the first train home.

The ride back was quiet, the kind of silence he needed. No messages, no sudden voice calls from Akito, and—thankfully—no more unexpected run-ins. Just the soft hum of the train, the blur of cityscapes rushing past the window, and his own reflection staring back at him.

By the time he stepped off at his stop, the sky had dimmed to a burnt orange. His shoes tapped against the pavement as he walked briskly through familiar streets, cutting through alleyways and backroads he could navigate with his eyes closed.

And finally, the familiar creak of his front gate.

He entered his house with a quiet sigh of relief, kicked off his shoes, and dropped his bag onto the floor beside the genkan.

Safe.

Home.

Peace.

The door clicked shut behind him.

And this time, there was no glowing screen, no message, no unexpected voice calling out to him.

Just the low hum of the electric fan and the smell of leftover rice and soy sauce from the kitchen.

Yuu slumped into the couch and stared at the ceiling.

"…Today was too much."

He didn't even bother checking his notifications.

He just closed his eyes.

And for the first time in days—truly—rested.

Chapter End Notes

Guests can now post a comment... I wonder if that's a good idea... oh well, I need more suggestions and opinions anyway

Chapter 22: Kamiyama High Festival (Part 1)

Chapter Notes

Things... are going to be interesting from now on :)

Also, this is half from the event, half from mine.

[Three Days Ago – Homeroom]

The room was quiet. Too quiet.

Their homeroom teacher stood in front of the whiteboard with a grin that didn't quite match the tired look in her eyes. "Alright, class! This year, our class will be participating in the Kamiyama High Festival!"

Not a single clap.

Not even a breath of enthusiasm.

Just blank stares.

"H-Huh?" she blinked, tapping the board nervously. "No one's excited?"

A hand rose near the back. "Sensei," said Student Z, tone flat. "I don't think anyone's motivated."

Another hand shot up. "Sensei, are you sure you didn't lose a bet or something?" asked Student X.

"N-No!" she said, voice cracking slightly. "O-Of course not!"

The class exchanged glances.

A shared thought passed through the room in silence.

Our teacher definitely lost a bet.

"Well then!" she said quickly, pressing forward. "If we win, it's my treat! You can order anything—drinks, dessert, a full meal!"

"…Sensei," someone said slowly. "You really did lose a bet, didn't you?"

"Ack—I said no!"

The entire class looked at her with the same expression.

Unconvinced.

Thus began the most chaotic group project they'd ever been forced into.

[Back to Preparation.]

And so, here they were—costumes, scripts, and stage directions in hand—trying to pull together a school play in less than a week.

Yuu glanced around the classroom-turned-dressing room.

“Someone remind me why we decided on a fantasy romance plot?”

“Because someone said they wanted knights and magic,” Toya replied without looking up from his prop sword.

“And someone else insisted on a tragic twist,” Yuu muttered, looking at Nene, who tried not to meet his eyes.

The air was thick with pre-performance nerves.

Outside, the hum of students and visiting families filled the campus like a festival ground.

Kamiyama High’s front gates were open to the public.

“Aoyagi-kun, I’m heading to the bathroom for a bit.”

Toya nodded without glancing up. “Yeah. Don’t take too long.”

With that, Yuu slipped out of the bustling prep room and made his way down the hallway.

The noise of the festival grew dimmer with each step—the laughter, the rustle of costumes, the clatter of props fading behind him.

When he finally reached the bathroom, he stepped into the farthest stall and shut the door quietly behind him.

Click.

The lock slid into place.

He let out a breath, calm settling into his shoulders like a coat draped over them.

In the silence, he raised one hand and swiped through the air.

A soft, subtle shimmer responded.

The familiar flicker of translucent blue light emerged, forming the now all-too-familiar UI: Project Sekai.

He scrolled.

“I’m not sure what’s going on,” he muttered under his breath, “but… ever since I unlocked the [Stage Sekai], two new features popped up.”

His eyes narrowed slightly as they hovered over the icons.

[Gacha]

and

[Events]

He tapped on the first.

A small wheel spun on the screen. A banner unfurled.

Digital cards shimmered in the air, each one depicting stylized images, characters, expressions, moments. Some glowed with golden light. Others were faded, grayed out.

“If I’m right… I can pull for these banners, but..."

He frowned.

“What is this for?”

Cards in a game usually meant powerups, buffs, status increases—tools to aid in rhythm gameplay.

But here… in this twisted hybrid of reality and game, it wasn’t clear how this applied.

Combat? Drama? Dialogue choices?

He swiped the banner away, dismissing the uncertainty for now.

Instead, he tapped [Events].

And then—

It opened.

Immediately, a new interface expanded, unfolding like a digital pamphlet across the stall’s interior. At the center of it all:

[KAMIYAMA HIGH FESTIVAL]

His breath caught in his throat.

“…This is today’s event?”

He tapped again. A brief synopsis appeared, glowing text scrawled in thin serif font:

“This Event Story revolves around: Akiyama Mizuki.”

Yuu stared.

The screen felt colder suddenly, like ice pressing against his fingertips.

He hadn’t seen Mizuki in days—not since their brief exchange with An during lunch.

And now, the system had assigned a narrative event connected to them?

“…This is too sudden.”

“And this timing is too perfect.”

Yuu muttered the words under his breath, voice barely audible within the confines of the bathroom stall. His fingers tightened at his temples, nails brushing lightly against his scalp as he scratched his head in slow, frustrated circles.

“This shitty god…” he grumbled, “what is he planning?”

There was no answer. Just the soft hum of the digital UI still glowing faintly in the air before him—silent, ever-present, watching.

Yuu clenched his jaw, then forced himself to breathe.

Inhale.

Exhale.

Slow.

Grounding.

“Don’t get too anxious,” he murmured, eyes steadying on the [Event] screen as it blinked idly with Mizuki’s name still displayed. “Let’s just finish this story event and get on with it.”

He tapped to close the interface, the holographic light dimming until it disappeared entirely.

The stall, once dim and narrow, now felt smaller, tighter.

But Yuu had no choice but to keep moving forward.

“As long as it’s not that event…”

Yuu exhaled, muttering the words like a quiet prayer to himself.

His eyes hovered over the screen one last time, dreading the possibility that the system might throw him into something darker. Something he wasn’t ready for.

[Where Does the Path of Thorns Go?]

Just the memory of that name sent a chill crawling up his spine.

He remembered every detail.

The event story layered in metaphors of pain and repression, its tone far heavier than anything a rhythm game had any right to explore.

It was Mizuki’s event.

Their event.

But that wasn’t the one today.

He let out a sigh of relief, the tension in his shoulders easing slightly.

“No… The first event should’ve been Stella After the Rain, right?”

He closed the [Events] tab with a quick swipe, letting the interface dissolve into thin air like mist evaporating in morning light.

Yuu leaned his head back against the cool bathroom stall and closed his eyes.

“No, no… let’s not spiral. Just get through this. One event at a time.”

He took another breath, steeling himself.

Then he stood, unlocked the stall, and stepped back into the hallway.

Outside, Kamiyama High buzzed with festival noise—laughter, stage soundchecks, rustling paper decorations.

A world too bright to notice the storm quietly brewing beneath it.

Yuu stepped out of the bathroom, the cool hallway air brushing against his face like a reset button. The familiar noise of the school festival preparations slowly faded back into focus—students dragging desks, voices calling out for tape or scissors, the distant boom of someone testing a speaker system.

He adjusted his uniform collar and started walking.

When he returned to the classroom, the scene hadn’t changed much. Paper props were scattered across desks, and half-finished decorations clung awkwardly to the walls. Amid the mild chaos, Aoyagi Toya looked up from where he was sorting script pages.

“Hey,” Toya called, brushing a strand of hair from his face, “what took you so long?”

Yuu offered a neutral shrug, slipping back into the rhythm like nothing had happened. “Nothing much… just spaced out.”

Toya gave a slight nod, not pushing further.

Yuu glanced at the stage props stacked near the chalkboard. “Anyway. Let’s try to finish setting these up before lunch hits.”

“Agreed,” Toya replied, already moving to grab a roll of tape.

[A Day Later]

Kamiyama High had transformed.

Colorful stalls lined the school grounds, each manned by students in half-coordinated outfits, some in full costume. The air was thick with the scent of grilled takoyaki and sweet crepes, posters fluttering from trees and taped clumsily onto windows. Music spilled from portable speakers, blending chaotically with the chatter of excited students and visitors.

Yuu Hazuki stood near the gym doors, hands tucked into his pockets as he scanned the grounds. He spotted Toya pacing slowly nearby, clipboard abandoned under one arm, looking about as done as Yuu felt.

“How’s your end holding up?” Yuu asked, strolling up beside him.

Toya gave a short exhale, eyes blank. “I give up. I’m not doing this anymore.”

“Oh,” Yuu nodded sagely. Then added with a straight face, “Well, if you’re not doing it… I won’t either.”

Toya blinked, turning his head slightly. “Huh? Why?”

Yuu shrugged, lips tugging into a dry smirk. “Because then I’d look like the only one putting in effort. Can’t have that. Makes me look too motivated.”

Toya stared at him for a long second, deadpan. “…You’re the worst.”

“I’ve been told.”

The two stood there for a moment, letting the chaos of the festival swirl around them. Laughter, announcements, the occasional pop of a balloon—everything felt just a little too loud, a little too overdone. And yet, there was something grounding about it.

Even if Toya looked ready to retire at seventeen.

“Let’s just… do whatever we want,” Yuu said, flashing a lazy thumbs up.

Toya blinked, unimpressed. “That’s not how school festivals work.”

“It is now,” Yuu replied, already turning on his heel. “We’re students. The bar’s underground.”

Toya sighed, reluctantly following. “You say that like it’s something to be proud of.”

“I take pride in my realism.”

They slipped away from the crowd, walking past classmates hurrying with props, cardboard signs, and trays of discounted festival snacks. A couple of third-years were rehearsing lines for their haunted house attraction nearby, one of them shouting “ARGH!” a little too dramatically.

Yuu and Toya passed them without a second glance.

As they strolled around the campus grounds, the atmosphere felt a little lighter—not because anything had changed, but because they weren’t trying to force it. No roles. No pressure. Just two guys ignoring their responsibilities for ten minutes and calling it a coping strategy.

“Think we’ll get in trouble for this?” Toya asked.

Yuu glanced up at the sky. “If we do, we’ll say we were on a scouting mission.”

“For what?”

“…Takoyaki.”

Toya actually laughed, a small breath through his nose. “Fine. But you’re paying.”

Yuu smirked. “Only if you make the order.”

They decided to ditch the preparation... since it's not worth it... and then the day arrived.

The Kamiyama High Festival had arrived in full force.

What had once been a campus of quiet halls and sleepy classrooms was now transformed into a lively carnival of color and sound.

Paper lanterns swayed overhead between buildings, streamers clung to windows, and the air was thick with the scent of festival food—grilled yakisoba, caramelized apples, buttered popcorn, and the faint tang of sugar from fresh cotton candy.

Yuu Hazuki and Toya Aoyagi found themselves on the outer edge of the chaos, lingering where the crowd hadn't quite spilled over yet.

They hadn't lifted a finger to help with the morning preparations—no surprise there—and instead wandered the festival grounds like rogue inspectors judging everything in silence.

That is, until they were spotted.

"Oh? Are you two on a date?" An's voice rang out with playful teasing, her arms folded and a grin tugging at the corners of her mouth as she strolled up beside them.

Toya blinked once. "No."

An's grin only widened. "Aww, don't be shy! Walking around like that, side by side like a drama poster…"

Yuu glanced down at himself, then at Toya, deadpan. "I'm not even wearing matching colors."

"But your vibes are matching," Mizuki added with a smirk, sipping from a paper cup filled with sparkling melon soda. "It's giving 'cool duo who bailed on class duties' energy."

Yuu tucked his hands into his pockets and let out a soft chuckle. "We are ditching prep, so not wrong."

"See? I knew it," An said triumphantly, nudging Mizuki with her elbow. "Told you they'd flake."

"But still…" Mizuki looked around, their eyes catching on the stream of people flowing between booths, "this place is packed! I didn't think it'd be this crowded…"

"It always is," An replied, a note of pride in her voice. "Our school festival brings in half the neighborhood. You see all the parents and local kids? It's like a whole city event."

A sudden burst of laughter erupted nearby as a group of students in animal onesies juggled candy boxes while promoting their haunted café. Just behind them, a stall had set up an eye-catching cotton candy spinner, strands of sugar blooming into pastel clouds.

"Look," Mizuki said, pointing. "They're selling cotton candy! It looks so cute—let's go!"

"Okay! Sounds good!" An beamed, the two of them darting off through the crowd.

Yuu turned to Toya, who was watching the pair leave with a blank expression. "So? What about you?"

Toya shifted his gaze to the stall, watching a girl twirl a stick of sugar floss for a toddler with sticky hands and a grin too wide for his face.

“…Too sweet for me.”

Yuu smirked. “Figured.”

Instead of following, the two boys stayed put near the fringe of the festival, the commotion drifting around them like white noise. Brightly colored banners fluttered from classroom windows above, and booth signs fought for attention with glitter paint and hand-drawn mascots. Every voice blended into a cheerful din—vendors calling out, students laughing, the occasional squeal from someone losing at a goldfish scoop game.

Yuu breathed in the warm, sugar-laced air and tilted his head slightly toward Toya. “Kamiyama High really goes all out, huh…”

Toya gave a curt nod, adjusting his sleeve as a small child with a balloon brushed past him. “Too much.”

Yuu chuckled, eyes following a group of cosplaying students dancing near the stage.

Too much, yeah… but maybe that’s what made it interesting.

“Well, I’ll leave you here,” Yuu said, adjusting the strap of his bag. “I’m actually a little concerned about our class.”

Toya gave a short nod. “Hm… Alright.”

Without another word, Yuu turned on his heel and disappeared into the crowd, weaving past lines of festival-goers and classmates with purposeful strides.

[Point of View: Akiyama Mizuki]

"Phew! That was a lot of stalls," Mizuki said, stretching their arms above their head. “I feel like I’m gonna pop.”

“Same here,” An replied, her smile crooked with amusement. “Wanna go back to the classroom?”

Just then, a familiar voice called out over the noise of the festival.

“Hey, An…!”

The two turned to see Kohane hurrying toward them, a small bag of merchandise swinging from her wrist.

“Kohane! You made it!” An’s eyes lit up as she waved her over. “You said you weren’t sure if you could come, so I almost gave up hope!”

“Hehe… I didn’t know if I’d have time,” Kohane said sheepishly. “But I finished up earlier than I thought.”

Mizuki tilted their head with interest, eyes scanning the girl standing beside An.

Shy demeanor, careful speech, holding her hands neatly in front of her.

“Oh, you must be Azusawa,” Mizuki said with a friendly smile. “An’s always talking about you.”

“That’s right!” An added with a grin, slinging an arm around Kohane’s shoulders. “She’s my unbeatable singing partner♪”

Kohane flushed slightly and bowed her head. “H-Hello there. I’m Kohane Azusawa.”

“I’m Mizuki Akiyama,” Mizuki replied brightly. “It’s really nice to meet you, Kohane!”

“Oh, um… Nice to meet you too!” she replied, fidgeting slightly with the hem of her sleeve.

“Hey,” An said, looking between the two with a grin, “how about we check stuff out all together?”

“A-All of us…? Oh… um…” Kohane’s voice wavered just slightly, eyes darting to Mizuki and back.

Mizuki blinked once, catching the hesitation.

(Oh… is she getting nervous because I’m here?)

They glanced away for a second, sensing it.

(She came all this way on her own, so she probably wants to hang out with An. In that case…)

“Ah—drat!” Mizuki suddenly exclaimed, placing a hand on their forehead in mock panic. “The teacher noticed me! Ever since I missed that test, she’s been on my case about make-ups!”

They stepped back dramatically, waving one hand as if fleeing a scene. “You two go on ahead—I’ve gotta find somewhere to hide! I’ll see you later, An!”

“Mizuki—wait, what?!” An called after them, half-laughing, half-confused.

But Mizuki was already turning, their footsteps quickening as they ducked into the nearest hallway with a flutter of their coat and a trail of hurried steps.

“Shoot, they’re gone…” An muttered.

Kohane blinked in surprise. “…They’re… really energetic.”

An sighed with a smile. “Yeah, that’s Mizuki for you.”

Mizuki slowed to a stop once they were clear of the crowd, their boots tapping lightly against the hallway floor. The festival noise had faded into a distant buzz—shouts, laughter, and the rhythmic beat of a nearby performance muffled behind classroom doors.

They glanced over their shoulder, half-expecting An to come chasing after them.

Nothing.

Mizuki smiled faintly and turned forward again. “Looks like they’re not following me,” they murmured to themself, brushing a lock of hair behind their ear. “I might as well look around on my own, then.”

Just as they rounded a corner, a familiar voice called out:

“H-Huh? Akiyama-san…? I thought you were with An.”

Mizuki blinked.

Standing in the middle of the hall was Yuu Hazuki, arms wrapped around a cardboard box labeled ‘COTTON CANDY SUPPLIES in bold black marker. His expression was calm, though the way he shifted his grip suggested the box wasn’t exactly light.

“Aha~ Hazuki-kun?” Mizuki tilted their head. “What’s with the delivery?”

“Ah,” Yuu said, adjusting the box slightly, “I was just helping out the class. Thought we were doing a play, but turns out they ditched the script and went with a cotton candy stand instead. And here I am, carrying a box full of sugar.”

Mizuki grinned. “Hmm~ I thought you were the type to ditch class.”

Yuu gave a short chuckle. “Haha. No.”

He paused for a moment, eyes narrowing slightly as they scanned Mizuki’s expression.

“…But still, why are you alone?”

Mizuki flinched, eyes darting away. “Oh… U-Uhm…”

Yuu didn’t press further. He simply looked directly, steadily. Mizuki could feel the weight of it. Not judgmental. Just quiet understanding.

“I see,” he said after a beat. “Then… want to come to my class?”

“Huh?”

Yuu shifted the box again and nodded in the direction he came from. “We were going to get Aoyagi-kun to help out, but since it’s not a play anymore, it’s just… sweets and stall stuff. Could use the company.”

Mizuki hesitated. Their gaze flicked to the box, then to Yuu’s face.

“I-I’m good…!” they said, waving both hands quickly. “Really!”

“Really?” Yuu raised an eyebrow.

“Yeah!” Mizuki insisted, smiling through the awkwardness.

Yuu gave a soft sigh, half a shrug. “Well… alright. But I’m telling you, sweet cotton candies are the best.”

Mizuki watched him walk away, the box balanced steadily in his arms.

“…Sugar and background characters, huh,” they murmured, then turned on their heel and headed down the hall.

Alone again. But somehow… not entirely.

Mizuki wandered through the sunlit hallway, weaving between students in brightly colored class T-shirts and festival gear. Streamers hung from the ceiling, and the air buzzed with overlapping voices and music spilling out from open classroom doors. The whole building pulsed with energy—colorful, chaotic, and loud.

(Every class seems to be showcasing something different...) Mizuki thought, scanning the vibrant posters pinned across the walls. (There are theater performances, movie-inspired shows... What should I see first?)

They glanced down at their own outfit—casual, stylish, and decidedly not matching the crowd.

(Although... everyone's wearing their class festival T-shirts. I'm gonna stick out like a sore thumb. Not like that's different from any other day…)

With a small sigh, Mizuki hugged their arms loosely around themselves and kept walking.

Suddenly—

"Ha ha ha ha ha!!"

A strange burst of laughter echoed from above.

They froze.

"…What the…?"

The laughter didn't match the cheerful atmosphere downstairs—it was theatrical, sharp, almost too perfect.

Mizuki's eyes flicked upward toward the second-floor landing.

(That was definitely from the empty classroom upstairs… Is someone pulling a prank? Or maybe it's one of those 'mystery' attraction things?)

They stood still for a moment as the noise died out.

The hallway around them buzzed with festival cheer, but that lone burst of laughter lingered in their mind.

(Well... I guess I don't have anything better to do.)

With a light exhale and a curious smile tugging at the corner of their lips, Mizuki turned on their heel and made their way up the stairs.

(Let's go see what's going on...)

Chapter 23: Kamiyama High Festival (Part 2)

[Kamiyama High School – Classroom]

The classroom had been hastily transformed into a makeshift theater. Desks were pushed aside to form a small stage in the center, and a few foldable chairs stood as an impromptu audience row. Atop one table rested a tablet, its screen glowing faintly blue as KAITO's holographic form shimmered to life, perfectly upright, arms crossed with theatrical poise.

"Tsukasa-kun," KAITO's voice rang with practiced clarity, "shall we rehearse the proposal scene again? It's a pivotal point of the play, so we need to get this part just right."

Tsukasa stood with radiant confidence, a glint of determination in his eyes. "You're right! Perfectionism is the mark of a true star, after all!"

From the sidelines, Rui gave a faint, lopsided smile. "Okay. I'll be your partner for this scene."

KAITO's image raised a hand with commanding grace. "Kneel down—your right hand holding the sword behind you, your left hand raised imploringly. Like this..."

Tsukasa followed the direction without hesitation, sinking to one knee with dramatic flair. He extended his left hand toward the empty air, while his other arm curled behind him, gripping the hilt of a cheap plastic sword made for the school play.

"Good, just like that," KAITO praised, voice warm with encouragement. "Now say your lines."

Tsukasa cleared his throat, eyes gleaming. "O Juliet! Sun of my life! I beg of you, allow me your fair hand in marriage!!"

He rose to his feet, extending the moment with a sweeping gesture. "Sweet Juliet…!"

"That was great!" KAITO beamed. "I think you're ready for the show."

"Thanks for your help, guys!" Tsukasa beamed with pride, standing tall as if he were already under the stage lights. "I'm going to stir up a whirlpool of emotions in the hearts of the students here—no, in the hearts of the whole world!"

From a corner, Nene Kusanagi leaned against a desk, arms folded. She raised an eyebrow. "I think you're a little out of touch with reality…"

Tsukasa flinched. "Oh yeah? What makes you say that?!"

Nene crossed the room with deliberate steps and plucked the script from a nearby table. "I gave this a read, thinking a parody of Romeo and Juliet might be fun. But all you've got here is a bunch of fight scenes and bizarre plot twists. How can anyone be moved by this?"

"You just don't get it!" Tsukasa's eyes sparkled with passion. "Seeing nine Romeos battling it out to the death to prove their love—it's going to be a gripping spectacle!"

Rui chuckled softly, flipping through the pages with a kind of fond amusement. “Oh, I love that scene too. Desperate to win Juliet’s heart, the Romeos mercilessly slaughter each other one after another.”

He paused, voice laced with morbid delight. “Blood gushes left and right to the accompaniment of agonized screams. And yet… the audience is unable to contain their laughter. I think it’s wonderful that you’ve turned a tragic love story into a violent comedy.”

“Huh?” Tsukasa blinked, his confident expression faltering. “But I wrote this as a tragedy, not a comedy…”

KAITO burst into laughter, the sound echoing cheerfully from the tablet. “Hahaha…!”

The school bell chimed overhead, a shrill reminder that time had once again gotten away from them.

Nene glanced at the clock, then turned to the door. “Oh, I didn’t realize it was so late… I need to help out at our class’s stall.”

She looked back over her shoulder at Tsukasa. “Your show’s starting soon. Shouldn’t you get ready? Even if we’re not in it, our reputations are on the line, so try not to totally mess things up.”

Tsukasa puffed out his chest indignantly. “What?! My performances are always top quality!”

Rui chuckled behind a hand. “Hehe. It’s just Nene’s way of saying she cares, Tsukasa.”

As Nene exited the classroom with a small wave, Tsukasa turned toward Rui and KAITO, holding the script close to his chest like a knight preparing for battle.

“…I’ll show them. This play will move hearts, one over-the-top sword fight at a time!”

[Back to Mizuki Akiyama’s POV]

“I think this is the classroom where that weird laughter was coming from…”

Mizuki’s steps slowed as they peeked around the doorframe, cautious yet curious. The hallway was abuzz with voices and footsteps, but the sound that had drawn them—boisterous, theatrical laughter—was unmistakably Rui's.

Their gaze settled on a familiar silhouette inside the room.

(Oh… that’s Rui, isn’t it…?)

He stood among a group of students, light catching in his violet-tinted hair as he flipped a page of a script. Around him, classmates laughed, chatted, and adjusted props in a flurry of last-minute rehearsal energy. There was something different about his posture—something softer. Relaxed. At ease.

(So… he’s managed to make some good friends.)

Mizuki’s expression softened, eyes tracing Rui’s subtle smile, the casual way he stood as though he belonged there.

(He really looks happy.)

They tilted their head slightly, a wistful smile forming at the corners of their lips.

“Hehe… maybe I should leave them be…”

Just as Mizuki turned to step away, a voice rang out behind them.

“Akiyama-san!”

Startled, Mizuki blinked and spun around.

“Hazuki-kun…”

Yuu jogged up, wiping a bit of sweat from his brow. The cardboard box from earlier was nowhere in sight, presumably delivered.

“Yo,” he greeted casually.

Mizuki blinked again. “What’s wrong?”

“Nothing,” Yuu replied with a shrug. “Just finished carrying the supplies for our class.”

“I see…”

For a second, they stood there in the corridor, the din of the festival all around—laughter, footsteps, the blare of a trumpet from somewhere outside. Sunlight filtered through the windows, casting warm streaks across the floor.

Then Yuu spoke again, voice quieter. “If you don’t mind… want to go explore the festival together?”

Mizuki looked at him, momentarily surprised.

The hallway buzz faded slightly. His tone had been casual, but not empty.

They smiled. “I… don’t mind.”

And with that, the two of them began to walk, blending back into the color and noise of Kamiyama High’s vibrant, chaotic festival day.

The corridors gave way to a burst of color and sound the moment Yuu and Mizuki stepped outside. The school courtyard had transformed into a miniature town of stalls and decorations. Hand-painted banners fluttered in the breeze, each boasting class projects, food menus, or “haunted house” warnings in bold strokes. Laughter echoed over the thrum of festival music piping through the school’s old PA system.

Yuu walked a step ahead at first, hands in his pockets, his expression unreadable—but his pace was relaxed, not rushed. Mizuki followed closely, their gaze bouncing between booths, costumes, and curious faces. The late afternoon sun painted everything in a soft gold, catching in strands of Mizuki’s pink hair as it swayed with each step.

“Wow,” Mizuki said, wide-eyed. “Kamiyama really goes all out, huh?”

Yuu gave a small nod. “Some people take it seriously. Others… just want to skip class.”

“Haha… that’s fair,” Mizuki said with a chuckle. Their eyes twinkled as they pointed toward a stand up ahead. “Ooh, they’re selling taiyaki!”

Without waiting, Mizuki drifted toward the stall, peering curiously at the display. “I haven’t had one in forever… The red bean ones look good…”

“You want one?” Yuu asked, already pulling his wallet from his back pocket.

“Eh? You’re buying?”

“You’re the one who pointed it out. That counts as a signal.”

Mizuki blinked, then laughed lightly. “Well, if you insist.”

Yuu ordered two—one red bean, one custard. They moved to the edge of the courtyard where the foot traffic thinned, finding a low stone ledge to sit on.

Mizuki bit into their taiyaki with a happy hum. “Mmm… still warm.”

Yuu took a bite of his as well, eyes casually scanning the crowd. Students rushed past them, some in costume, others dragging carts of supplies or passing out flyers.

For a moment, they just sat there. Quietly eating. Breathing in the late afternoon breeze.

Then Mizuki broke the silence.

“Thanks,” they said softly.

Yuu looked over, one eyebrow raised.

“For this. For walking around with me. I know you probably had better things to do.”

Yuu shook his head. “Not really. You seemed like you needed the break.”

“…Maybe I did.”

Their eyes met briefly, a shared understanding in the look.

“…Anyway,” Mizuki said with a grin, flicking away the mood before it got too heavy. “I think there’s a cosplay contest happening near the gymnasium. Want to check it out?”

“Sure,” Yuu said, brushing crumbs from his fingers. “As long as you don’t enter.”

Mizuki gasped with mock offense. “What makes you think I wouldn’t win?!”

Yuu smirked faintly. “That’s the problem.”

As the two rounded a corner of the courtyard, Mizuki’s eyes lit up.

“Oh, look!” they exclaimed, pointing toward a classroom entrance draped in black curtains and eerie cobwebs. Cardboard tombstones lined the path, and a fog machine hissed faintly from inside. “This class is doing a haunted house! The decorations are really good!”

Mizuki leaned in, curiosity dancing in their eyes. A skeletal hand peeked from a closet prop, and somewhere deeper inside, a scream rang out—high-pitched and overly dramatic.

(Heh, I bet this would totally give Ena the creeps…) Mizuki thought with a smirk. (Mafuyu, though… she probably wouldn't even flinch. Kanade… Hmm. I kind of want to see what she looks like when she gets startled. That'd be cute, wouldn't it?)

They shook their head suddenly, cheeks puffing with frustration.

(Wait—why am I thinking about them right now? It's not like they're here…)

But a wistful sigh escaped their lips before they could catch it.

"It'd be fun if Shinonome-san were here," Mizuki murmured aloud.

Yuu glanced over at them, slightly surprised. "You mean Ena?"

Before Mizuki could answer, another voice interrupted.

"Shinonome, don't forget your shift starts at three!" a passing classmate said.

Yuu's eyes shifted—just in time to spot Akito, casually leaning against the school wall with his phone in hand, and beside him, Toya, standing with that usual composed air.

"No worries," Akito called back to the student. "I'll be back in time. See you then."

He slid his phone into his pocket and walked over.

"Sorry for the wait, Toya."

"It's fine," Toya said, glancing toward the haunted house sign. "I just got here, too. So… your class theme is a haunted house?"

"Yeah," Akito replied, scratching his head. "But I'm just the receptionist. Not exactly the scariest part."

"What about you?" Akito asked. "You doing anything?"

"Selling cotton candy," Toya answered plainly. "Not the basic kind. We're using flavor infusions—matcha, sakura, stuff like that. Making them is… more fun than I thought."

"Flavored cotton candy, huh?" Akito raised a brow. "Didn't think you'd be the festival type."

"I thought we'd be doing a stage play, honestly…"

"Oh, right! You sent me a picture earlier. Still can't imagine you holding a stick of cotton candy though."

Just then, their eyes turned, drawn by a flash of coral pink hair and a presence too bold to ignore.

"Hey, you there!" Mizuki called, walking right up to Akito.

"Huh?" Akito blinked. "Me?"

“Your name’s Akito Shinonome, right?” Mizuki asked, already grinning. “Any chance you’re Ena’s little brother?”

Yuu blinked at the bluntness, but didn’t interrupt. He quietly watched Mizuki's eyes gleam with amusement.

Akito’s brow furrowed slightly. “Uh… yeah. Ena’s my sister. Why?”

“Really?! I knew it!” Mizuki clapped their hands together. “So you go to Kamiyama too?! That’s hilarious.”

“…Yeah?” Akito gave Yuu a confused glance.

“And you’re in the haunted house class? Wait… you must be the same year as me! I had no idea Ena’s little brother was my age!”

“Why would Ena tell you that?” Akito muttered, clearly still trying to process the whirlwind of energy that was Mizuki.

“Oh, I’m Mizuki Akiyama. Class 1-A. Ena and I are close! …Well, close enough.” They flashed a wink. “I hang out with her pretty often.”

Akito raised a brow, skeptical. “Close with Ena…? Huh. You’re not messing with me?”

“Not at all!”

Yuu, watching the scene unfold, let a quiet smile tug at the corner of his lips. Seeing Mizuki talk about Ena—so cheerfully, so openly—was oddly refreshing. It was a rare sight… and a genuine one.

Just then, another voice entered the conversation.

“Toya-san,” Mizuki greeted with a wave. “Hello!”

Toya nodded calmly, eyes flicking to Yuu and Mizuki. “Seems you two are spending time together.”

“Yup,” Mizuki replied brightly, stepping a little closer to Yuu’s side. “We’re each other’s company for the day.”

Yuu let out a small exhale and nodded. “More or less.”

Akito blinked, now thoroughly confused. “Wait—since when did you two start hanging out?”

“You’d be surprised."

“Anyway, Li’l Bro, is Ena here today?” Mizuki asked, grinning as they leaned toward Akito, playful sparkle in their eyes.

“…Li’l Bro?” Akito repeated, visibly confused, before sighing with a mix of irritation and resignation. “I have no idea what my sister’s up to. She’s probably still in bed, like always.”

“Aww, I figured,” Mizuki pouted. “It would’ve been nice if we could hang out with Hazuki-kun too… you know, with Ena.”

“Actually,” Toya spoke up calmly, his voice quiet but clear over the ambient buzz of the festival, “you two are welcome to join us.”

The three of them blinked at him in unison.

“Huh?” Yuu, Akito, and Mizuki said together.

Toya offered a small nod. “My friend’s class play is starting soon. I was planning to watch it—he worked hard on it, so I’d like to show support. If you’re free, you’re more than welcome.”

“Oh, is this that thing you mentioned earlier?” Akito asked. “The friend—you mean that Tsukasa guy you introduced me to before?”

“Yes. He wrote the script and he’s also playing the lead.”

“Huh,” Mizuki said, eyes lighting up. “That sounds kind of cool! I don’t usually go to plays, so I’m curious now. Thanks for inviting me—if you’re really okay with it.”

Yuu gave Akito a sly look and smirked. “Are you sure we’re not interrupting your date?”

Akito gave him a deadpan glare. “Don’t start.”

Toya just nodded without missing a beat. “The more people in the audience, the better for Tsukasa. You coming, Akito?”

“Fine, whatever…” Akito muttered, stuffing his hands into his pockets. “So he’s actually doing it, huh?”

“Yay! Thanks, Li’l Bro! Thanks, Toya!” Mizuki sang, bouncing slightly on their toes. “What are we still doing here? Let’s go~!”

And before Akito could protest, Mizuki tugged on his sleeve.

“Oi—don’t pull—! And seriously, stop calling me that!” Akito stumbled a little, dragged forward. “Whoa!”

Toya and Yuu exchanged a knowing look as they followed close behind, amused by the chaos.

Together, the four of them made their way through the crowded hallway toward Class 2-A.

The classroom was buzzing when they arrived—audiences chatting excitedly as desks were rearranged into rows, the curtains drawn, and lights dimmed slightly for atmosphere.

The handmade banner above the chalkboard read:

“Romeo: Battle Royale"

“…This is gonna be something,” Akito mumbled, unimpressed.

“Wow!” Mizuki exclaimed, eyes scanning the packed room. “They’ve got a huge crowd!”

“No surprise,” Toya said, calm as ever. “Most of them are probably here to see Tsukasa-senpai perform.”

“You sure about that…?” Akito asked, squinting at the title. “I mean… ‘Romeo: Battle Royale’? Sounds like a low-budget action flick…”

“Don’t judge a book by its cover,” Mizuki grinned. “We’re lucky! Looks like the front seats are still open!”

“Good,” Toya nodded. “We’ll get the clearest view of his performance that way.”

Akito glanced sidelong at him. “You actually seem kinda excited, Toya…”

“Do I?”

As the three of them slipped into their seats, Yuu stepped back, giving them a small wave.

“Wait—guys, I’ve gotta run. My class needs more help. Kusanagi-san’s handling it on her own right now.”

“Yeah, yeah. Enjoy yourself,” Akito said with a small wave.

“See you, Hazuki-kun!” Mizuki chirped.

“Enjoy the festival, Akiyama-san,” Yuu replied with a light smile before turning toward the door.

[Changing to Yuu Hazuki's POV]

He walked down the corridor slowly, letting the sound of excited chatter fade behind him.

Good… everything’s still on track.

He exhaled.

The air outside the classroom felt lighter, as if the story itself was easing off its pressure—if only for a moment.

I managed to blend in. I didn’t disrupt the flow of the event…

He ran a hand through his hair.

“I’m tired…”

The sun had begun dipping slightly toward the west, casting long slants of golden light through the school windows. The festival bustled on around him, but Yuu moved quietly, unnoticed by most—exactly the way he liked it.

Still… I’m surprised my brain managed to memorize this entire story arc. I haven’t even saved…

He chuckled softly to himself.

And for just a moment, it felt like he was playing a game again, only this time, he was inside the screen.

"For now... they should be enjoying the play."
Yuu muttered under his breath, eyes narrowing slightly as he stepped away from the bustling hallway.

His footsteps slowed as he reached a quiet alcove near the stairs—out of sight, out of mind. With no one around, the background noise of festival laughter and dramatic stage dialogue faded into a soft hum, like static behind a screen.

He rolled his shoulders and exhaled—deep, slow, controlled.

"I should start pulling the strings."

His fingers moved subtly, swiping through empty air—once again, the familiar Project Sekai interface flickered into view.

Glowing data spiraled into focus, lighting up his eyes with a quiet intensity.

This was a stage.

And he had his part to play.

Chapter 24: Kamiyama High Festival (Part 3)

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

"First…" Yuu muttered under his breath, glancing at the flickering interface only he could see, "Always make sure Akiyama-san reaches the rooftop with Rui. That's when the flashbacks start."

His eyes scanned the invisible nodes suspended in the air like constellations—paths branching, scripts unfolding, outcomes hinging on timing.

He was mid-swipe when—

"Oi. Hazuki-kun?"

The familiar voice pulled him back to reality. He flinched—only slightly—as he turned toward the hallway.

There, walking side by side, were Toya and Akito. Their steps slowed when they noticed him standing by the stairwell, half-shadowed by the open window.

"What are you doing here?" Toya asked, a hint of confusion threading his otherwise calm tone. "I thought you were still at the stall."

Yuu blinked once, calmly. "Ah… I was taking a rest."

"Nah, he's ditching." Akito smirked, hands in his pockets, the usual teasing tone in his voice.

"I am taking a rest," Yuu repeated flatly, not even bothering to argue further.

But then, Toya's next question cut just a bit deeper.

"More importantly, have you seen Akiyama-san? Or Tsukasa-senpai?"

Yuu's eyes widened ever so slightly—a crack in his composure. The play's over already? He hadn't expected the scene to wrap so quickly.

[Genius of Acting – Activated]

Without missing a beat, his posture relaxed again, lips curling into a faintly apologetic smile.

"I haven't seen them yet." He kept his tone casual. "Like I said—I've just been resting here."

Toya gave a small nod, satisfied with the answer.

"I see. Let's go, Akito."

"Yeah, yeah." Akito glanced back once with a squint before disappearing down the hall with Toya.

As soon as they were out of sight, the flickering UI reappeared before Yuu's eyes.

He sighed through his nose.

“...That was close.”

His fingers resumed swiping. Time to push the story forward again.

[Back to Mizuki Akiyama’s POV]

“Tsukasaaa!”

Mizuki called out into the crowd, voice barely audible over the clamor of the festival. But as expected—no response. No luck here either…

They wandered a little further, aimlessly weaving between students and guests until a small commotion drew their attention near the gym entrance.

“Hm? What’s this?”

A modest crowd had gathered in front of a makeshift stage, cheers rising like confetti in the air.

“And the winner of the Kamiyama Gaming Tournament is... Nene Kusanagi!” the host’s amplified voice boomed, prompting an enthusiastic round of applause. “Congratulations! Her incredible high score left the contestants in the dust! Could we please have a few words, Ms. Kusanagi?”

Mizuki’s eyes widened slightly as Nene appeared onstage, flustered but trying her best to stay composed beneath the attention.

“I, um... I’m... I’m very happy. Th-Thank you...” she said softly.

The host leaned in again, cheerful. “Your score in the shooting game category deserves a special mention! Could you give us some tips on how to get better at shooters?”

“I, um... I just play a lot at home...”

Mizuki smiled faintly. She’s so different up close… but somehow the same.

They tilted their head thoughtfully.

“Hey, I think I’ve heard of that shooter. Isn’t it super hard? She must be amazing...” they muttered, then quickly shook themselves from the thought. “Wait, I’m already getting distracted! Tsukasa! Where’s Tsukasa...? Ugh, this is getting me nowhere. Too many people have seen him, but none are useful leads.”

Just then—

“Hey, look. It’s Mizuki-san!” a familiar voice called.

Mizuki froze. A pair of classmates from their own year were approaching—people they recognized only vaguely but knew well enough to expect that tone.

“It’s been ages! I didn’t think you’d show up!”

They offered a polite, practiced smile. “Oh... hey. Good to see you again! The festival seemed fun, so I thought I’d check it out♪”

The girls looked them up and down.

“But... why aren’t you wearing the class T-shirt?” one asked with faux curiosity.

“Well… I was offered one, but getting changed felt like too much of a bother. So I figured I’d pass.”

A brief pause.

“Hm. Yeah, I see your point,” the other said, lowering her voice slightly. “I guess wearing the same T-shirt as everyone else in your class is pretty cliché and uncool.”

“Totally,” the first whispered. “Still, Mizuki’s kind of asking for attention, right? I mean, look at that outfit.”

Mizuki’s smile didn’t falter.

Not even a twitch.

But their heart dropped just a bit. Not from the words—they were used to those. It was the familiarity. The fact that it never seemed to change.

Just then—

A hand brushed lightly against their shoulder.

“Actually, Akiyama-san looks plenty cute in their outfit.” Yuu Hazuki’s calm voice cut through the air, a smooth interruption that turned all heads.

“I’ve been looking for you.”

“H-Hazuki-kun?!” Mizuki blinked, eyes wide.

He simply offered a small wave. “Yo. I’m done with the stall, so I finally got a break.”

“I-I see...” Mizuki replied, tension draining just a little.

Behind them, the two classmates leaned toward each other.

“Wait… Mizuki-san has a friend?”

“I didn’t know that…”

“Also, this guy—he’s kinda cute too, right?”

“Should we invite him?”

One of them turned back toward Mizuki with a forced smile. “Hey, do you want to check out the festival with us? It’s been so long since we got to chat.” She eyed Yuu like he was part of the invitation.

Before Mizuki could say anything, Yuu's voice came first—light but firm.

"Sorry, but we're actually looking for someone right now."

"Oh... okay. That's too bad."

"You guys have fun though! See ya!" Mizuki said, waving them off, the smile on their face now a little more real—if only out of relief.

Once the girls were gone, Mizuki's voice dipped into a mutter. "Wearing the same outfit is uncool, huh? You can only say that because you actually fit in..."

Yuu glanced over, scratching the side of his head. "Geez… what's their problem anyway?"

Mizuki didn't answer right away. They just looked ahead, eyes focused on the crowd but not really seeing it.

Then finally—

"Thanks, Hazuki-kun."

Yuu blinked. "For what?"

"For showing up. Right on cue." Mizuki gave a tiny smile, then took a deep breath. "Let's go."

But before Mizuki would run off again, Yuu grabbed their arm.

"Akiyama-san."

Mizuki paused, looking at their arm before looking up at Yuu.

"What's wrong?"

[Switching to Yuu Hazuki's POV]

Before Mizuki could slip away again into the current of the festival, He reached out and grabbed their arm—not hard, just enough to stop them.

"Akiyama-san."

They paused, blinking at the contact. Their gaze dropped to his hand, then slowly lifted to meet his.

Their eyes—soft pink and curious—tilted ever so slightly with concern.

"What's wrong?" they asked, voice light but careful.

He hesitated.

The noise of the festival seemed to fade, dimming to a low hum behind my ears. All he could focus on was the moment between us—the weight of it.

The way Mizuki was looking at him.

Not judging, not defensive.

Just… waiting.

I want to say something.

But I shouldn’t.

I know I shouldn’t.

Everything—the event—it’s all been going as it should.

I've been playing along, making sure nothing spirals out of control, making sure the emotional arcs align with what’s already been written.

And yet—

As a Project Sekai hardcore fan...

I know exactly what’s coming.

The rooftop.

Rui.

The bittersweet flashbacks.

The weight Mizuki's been carrying that nobody else seems to fully see.

I know what they’re about to face, even if they don't.

Even if they’ve buried it too deep to name.

But even so…

As your friend…

I can’t help but want to say something.

Something real.

To break the invisible fourth wall, I’ve been carefully tiptoeing around all this time.

But that would ruin it, wouldn’t it?

Break the spell.

Destroy the moment that’s meant to be yours.

His grip loosened slightly, but he didn’t let go.

“You’re going to be okay, you know,” He said quietly, trying to make it sound casual even as his heart pounded.

Mizuki blinked. “Huh? What brought that on?”

“Nothing. Just… a feeling.” He gave a faint smile, then slowly let go of their arm.

Their expression lingered on mine for a moment longer—searching, maybe—before they gave a small, crooked grin.

“You’re weird, Hazuki-kun.”

“Yeah. I’ve been hearing that a lot lately.”

They laughed softly, then turned and headed off, their pace picking up with every step.

He stood there for a moment longer, watching until they disappeared into the crowd.

And then he sighed.

“God, this is harder than I thought…”

The world surged back in—voices, movement, festival energy pulsing like a heartbeat all around him—but none of it reached him.

Because the story was moving now.

And all he could do… was follow.

“Now then… I should enjoy and leave the characters be.”

Yuu stretched his arms toward the sky, back arching with a quiet sigh as the sounds of the festival surrounded him—laughter, footsteps, the metallic sizzle of takoyaki grills, and the distant beat of a band performance from the outdoor stage.

He let the warm afternoon light bathe his face, eyes briefly closing. His job—if it could even be called that—was done. The story had found its rhythm again.

And just like that, without his interference, it continued.

Somewhere far above—on the rooftop of Kamiyama High—Mizuki stood face to face with Rui, the early summer breeze catching their hair as quiet memories stirred beneath their chest.

Their voice was low, uncertain at first… but steady.

They spoke of how they used to be.

Of the parts they’d lost.

Of how hard it was to see themself in mirrors that only showed reflections of the past.

Rui listened.

Not as a performer, not as a genius, but as someone who had always seen what others missed.

One by one, the others arrived—An’s cheerful voice, Akito’s exasperated honesty, Toya’s quiet presence, Tsukasa’s energy, Nene’s shy glance. All of them, drawn to the same place by something unspoken. And up there, with nothing but sky above and memories behind them, Mizuki smiled—not because everything was perfect, but because it wasn’t.

It was real.

And down below, far removed from that moment but deeply aware of it—Yuu Hazuki sat beneath a tree, a half-finished crepe in one hand, his other resting on his knee.

Suddenly, a soft chime echoed in the air.

Before him, a glowing holographic screen flickered to life, its familiar transparent blue overlay popping into view.

[The Event Has Ended.]

[You will receive your reward via mail afterwards.]

Yuu stared at it blankly for a moment, then let out a quiet laugh. “Figures.”

With a swipe of his hand, the interface dissolved into a shimmer of light.

He leaned back against the trunk of the tree, letting the breeze rustle through the festival banners overhead. In the distance, music played—faint, happy, alive.

And for once, there was nothing to fix.

Nothing to monitor.

Just the warm, golden hum of a world that had, somehow, kept spinning without him.

Just as Yuu began to relax beneath the tree, content to let the story unfold without his touch, a sudden voice cut through the warm hum of the fading day.

“There you are!”

He turned.

Approaching him in a lively cluster was the entire group—An, waving with that signature spark in her eye, Akito wearing a familiar smirk, Toya trailing just behind, and the rest not far behind her.

Yuu blinked. “Huh…? All of you...?”

“What are you doing here, all alone?” Akito leaned in slightly, eyebrow raised. “Ohhh, could it be you’ve got a secret girlfriend hiding somewhere around here?” he teased, grinning.

Yuu exhaled through his nose, “You wish.”

“We came looking for you,” Toya said plainly, adjusting the strap of the small festival bag over his shoulder. “Didn’t seem right to just end the day without you.”

“Let’s at least have some fun at the night festival together,” Rui added, ever-smiling, his tone softer—like an invitation without strings.

“Right, right!” Tsukasa beamed, dramatically placing a hand over his heart. “You’re coming too! I want the biggest audience I can get tonight!”

Yuu narrowed his eyes. “Audience...?”

“Heh. Turns out anyone who wants to take the stage is welcome to,” Tsukasa explained, practically vibrating with enthusiasm. “And that’s exactly what I intend to do! My exquisite voice will soon resonate across all of Kamiyama!”

“Is that why you dashed off after the play?” Mizuki asked, a little breathless from keeping up.

“Precisely! I had to prepare for an impromptu performance worthy of a standing ovation.” His eyes sparkled. “Oh! And I’ve also roped in Yuu, Akito, and Toya as my backup singers!”

“What.” Yuu blinked flatly. “I don’t remember signing up for anything.”

“Decent at singing, huh? Gee, thanks.” Akito crossed his arms, brow twitching.

“I’d be happy to sing with you, Tsukasa-senpai,” Toya offered calmly, clearly unfazed.

“And this festival is the perfect moment to unveil my latest invention,” Rui added with a mysterious flourish, fingertips dancing in the air like a magician revealing his next trick.

Nene shot him a wary glance. “It’s another pointless gadget, isn’t it...?”

As the banter continued, An suddenly perked up. “Oh! Almost forgot!”

She reached into her sling bag and pulled out a tightly rolled piece of cloth—a folded class T-shirt, creased from being stashed but unmistakably bright in color. She offered it with a grin.

“Here, Mizuki! I brought your class shirt! Figured you might change your mind now that it’s not so crowded downstairs.”

Mizuki stared at the shirt for a moment, blinking. “Oh...”

“It’s cute, right?” An added. “Maybe we can find you somewhere to change—there’s a restroom that should be free now.”

“But come to think of it…” Akito eyed the shirt with a flat look. “Your class’s T-shirt kinda sucks.”

“Akito!” An puffed her cheeks. “How can you say that?!”

“It’s just... not something I’d wear.”

“Not you too, Mizuki…” she whined, spinning toward them.

Mizuki chuckled softly, holding the shirt up with a critical eye. “Hehe. We could layer it with something cute. Make it work, you know?”

Yuu stepped forward with a casual shrug. “What are you talking about, Akiyama-san? No matter what you wear, you always look cute.”

“Uwah…” Akito turned to him with a mock-horrified expression. “Hazuki. Please. I just ate.”

“Now, now!” An waved both arms, trying to rein in the chaos. “Okay—go get changed, Mizuki! The night festival’s waiting!”

Laughter followed them down the corridor, the low buzz of the evening crowd swelling beyond the windows.

And just like that, Yuu found himself pulled along again—not by fate, not by the story's script, but by something warm, messy, and real.

Something like friendship.

Something worth staying for.

Chapter End Notes

I can rest easy.

Chapter 25: The One Who Watches

Chapter Notes

Adding a new tag [Psychological]

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Just yesterday, the school grounds had been bursting with life—laughter echoing through the halls, the scent of fried festival food lingering in the air, and excitement sparking in every direction like fireworks. But today...

It was quiet.

Too quiet.

Yuu Hazuki lay propped up on his bed, a hand resting limply on his stomach, eyes glazed over as he stared at the semi-transparent holographic UI hovering inches from his face.

The glow from the interface cast pale light across his expression—tired, unimpressed, and barely awake.

"…I would open the mail for my reward right now," he muttered, voice heavy with exhaustion, "but I'm still wiped from yesterday."

Despite that, his fingers moved on their own. A lazy swipe opened the message tab. The screen shimmered softly before a notification popped up front and center.

[Congratulations! You've completed the event: Kamiyama High Festival]

Reward: 5,500 Crystals

Yuu blinked.

He stared blankly at the numbers for a moment. "Again… I still don't know what the gacha system does. I'm inside the game."

His voice rose slightly with irritation as he shifted upright on the bed, dragging a hand through his disheveled hair.

He tapped the [Gacha] tab just to see it pulse in return, the jewel-toned button swirling with hypnotic particle effects—glimmering purples and golds, like a dream luring him in.

Come on, it seemed to whisper. Just one pull. You know you're curious.

Yuu narrowed his eyes. "What am I even pulling for? Another me with different voice lines? Do I get an ultra-rare 5-star 'Brooding Bench-Sitter' version of myself?"

His sarcasm didn’t help the unease settling in his chest.

He exhaled slowly, ready to close the screen, when something flickered in the upper corner.

Just beside the crystal count, something new.

A small, metallic icon labeled:

[Convert]

“…What the hell is that?”

His brow furrowed, finger hovering uncertainly. That hadn’t been there before. Not in any version of the game he remembered.

Not in any gameplay mechanic.

With a breath, he tapped it.

The screen expanded—lines of data flashing rapidly before settling into a clean menu.

Sleek black with violet-blue accents, the window displayed a single, mysterious message at the top:

[Skill Points]
[System Items]
[Real Life Currency]

Yuu’s mouth went dry. “This… this wasn’t in the original game. Not even close.”

His eyes darted across the menu, heart beginning to race.

“Was this for me?”

The holographic UI didn’t hesitate.

[Yes.]

The word blinked on screen in a quiet, almost reverent pulse.

Yuu froze.

A chill crept down his spine. He hadn’t spoken aloud that time.

His lips parted. “…Did—Did you just respond to me?”

There was no delay.

[Yes.]

"...I see, you're the god that trapped me here, aren't you!? Get off the hologram and face me!"

[...You can say I'm close to a God.]

A dry scoff escaped his lips. “Tch… Of course. Of course it’d turn into this.”

He leaned forward, eyes narrowing. There had to be something—an error, a bug, a misplaced developer signature. Anything that proved this wasn't happening. Anything that said this was a glitch in the code, not something sentient peering back at him.

But the UI remained pristine.

Too pristine.

A sterile black-and-blue interface with no cracks, no seams. Not even the slightest sign of human origin.

"…What do you want from me?" he asked at last, his voice quieter now, barely more than a breath.

The screen didn't flicker.

[You've been doing well. That's all.]

His voice sharpened. "And what happens if I stop playing along?"

The reply came instantly.

[Then the story will break.]
[And the world will try to correct itself.]
[With or without you.]

His mouth went dry.

So that was it. He wasn't a player anymore—he was a pillar. A thread keeping the narrative from unraveling. And if he stepped away… the world would either swallow him, or move on without him.

"…So that's it?" he said bitterly. "You've trapped me here to act out your twisted version of the game?"

There was a pause.

Then, without fanfare:

[Wasn't your goal to go home?]
[Then it changed—to saving Miku, correct?]

Yuu's breath caught.

He stared at the words as if they might change. As if they might take themselves back. But they didn't. The interface waited, patient and unrelenting.

"You're right," he murmured. "But…"

[Then... You could've said no.]
[You could've ignored the glitches. Forgotten the voices. Focused on yourself.]
[But you didn't.]

A tremor passed through him. He felt exposed, like his own thoughts were being read aloud.

[The truth is…]
[You wanted to stay here.]

Yuu froze.

His hands clenched the sheets beneath him, knuckles going pale.

His mouth opened, then closed. Words refused to form.

Because… it wasn't wrong.

At least, not entirely.

In the silence that followed, he couldn't bring himself to argue.

Couldn't muster a lie to protect himself from the reality that had already been laid bare.

"…I…"

No sound came after that.

And still, the UI hovered in front of him.

Unmoving.

Unblinking.

Waiting.

[How was it? Playing the role of a character that doesn't exist, yet trying so hard to fit in?]

The words appeared without fanfare—clinical, composed, and all too sharp. They lingered on the screen, their glow dim but insistent, as if they already knew the answer.

Yuu said nothing.

His throat tightened, the quiet hum of the UI seeming to fill the silence in his chest. The room, still and dimly lit, felt like a stage frozen between acts—no audience, no applause, just a single spotlight hanging over him.

[Did you have fun meeting your favorite characters?]

Another beat passed.

[I bet you've already fallen in love with one of them.]

The breath caught in his lungs.

His shoulders, once rigid with denial, slumped ever so slightly. His gaze dropped from the hovering screen to his lap, where his fingers curled into the fabric of his blanket.

"…You're right."

The screen paused—no reply this time, no flashing update. As if even the system itself was stunned by his answer.

“I didn’t want to admit it,” he murmured, the words escaping like steam in the cold air. “But you’re right…”

He leaned forward, resting his elbows on his knees, voice lowering into a whisper meant only for himself.

“Half of me wants to go home…”

The image of his empty apartment flickered in his mind. The silence of the real world. The weight of loneliness and the crushing regularity of normal life.

“…but half of me wants to stay here.”

Here, where voices reached out to him. Where his actions mattered. Where smiles weren’t rare.

Where the people—fabricated or not—felt more genuine than anyone he'd ever known.

He looked back up at the glowing screen.

And in that quiet moment, with his reflection caught faintly in the UI, Yuu Hazuki couldn’t help but ask:

“…What happens to me if I stay?”

The screen didn’t answer immediately.

The soft pulse of the holographic screen hung before him like a heartbeat, its glow casting faint ripples of light across Yuu’s face. He stared at it, expression unreadable, a strange mix of acceptance and unease settling in his chest.

[Nothing will happen… Not yet… I do not know.]

He exhaled quietly through his nose. “I see…”

The silence that followed was not empty—it was the kind that presses at the edges of thought, deep and reflective. Then the system replied again:

[But one day… you will make a choice in the future.]
[Go home… or stay.]

The message blinked once before fading into stillness.

Yuu sat there in the hush of his room, backlit by the glowing screen, a quiet hum in the air as the world outside remained distant. He nodded slowly.

“I know.”

Even if he didn’t want to.

Even if he hadn’t yet decided which answer would hurt less.

The interface shimmered again, its presence unwavering.

[Do you have any questions? Story? Systems?]

He hesitated for a moment. Then asked, quietly:

"…Is this system only favored for me?"

There was a brief delay, as though the system were considering how best to reply.

[…Correct.]

[I am only here to provide aid.]

[By helping you beat the stages…]

[By adjusting your stats…]

[By evolving your feelings…]

[…And enhancing your physique.]

The final word struck him with strange weight. Yuu's eyes narrowed slightly as he let the meaning settle.

"So you've been altering me."

[Gradually.]

[You've felt it, haven't you?]

And he had.

The way his body responded now—faster reflexes, sharper senses. The way rhythm synced into muscle memory, the way emotions lingered longer than they used to. He thought it was just adaptation… just him adjusting.

But it wasn't.

It was the system adapting him.

Molding him.

He glanced at his hand, flexing his fingers once. The lines of his palm looked the same, but he felt… different.

"Why?"

The question came softer than before—less accusatory, more curious. More… afraid.

[Because this is no longer a game to anyone or to you...]

[It is your world now.]

Yuu's breath hitched slightly.

The screen dimmed, pulsing once like a fading heartbeat.

[You are the protagonist.]

He let out a breath—dry, humorless. A crooked smile tugged at the corner of his lips.

“Protagonist, huh…” he muttered, eyes dropping to the floor.

His voice was quiet, but tinged with something between amusement and resignation. “It’s funny how you and Ichika-san said the same thing when I was having a dilemma…”

The memory flickered unbidden: Ichika’s calm voice, gentle but resolute, standing beneath the filtered sunlight of the School SEKAI. That moment when she looked him in the eye and said it like it was the most natural truth in the world.

He wasn’t special. He was a background character, a quiet observer in a world made for someone else’s story.

But now, he had a system, evolving stats, memories of two worlds, and the gaze of something godlike watching from beyond the code.

Maybe she was right.

Maybe they both were.

“…Still sounds ridiculous,” he added under his breath, brushing his hand through his hair.

The screen pulsed again.

[You’ll understand soon.]

He scoffed lightly. “That’s what I’m afraid of.”

But he didn’t look away.

Not yet.

Yuu’s gaze sharpened.

The glow from the UI cast a pale, bluish light over his face, outlining the weary tension in his eyes.

He sat forward, elbows resting on his knees, fingers interlaced as if to brace himself for the answer he wasn’t sure he wanted to hear.

“Then… I have one more question,” he said slowly.

The system didn’t hesitate.

[Ask.]

He looked up. His voice came out steadier than he felt.

“What if I messed up one of the events… because of my actions?”

The silence that followed was not comforting.

The UI flickered faintly, then responded—not in a cold mechanical tone, but something deeper.

Like a voice embedded in the very fabric of the world, speaking through light and code.

[Then the story will shift.]

[The path will diverge.]

[And the consequences will ripple.]

Yuu’s heart sank.

Some events may try to correct themselves. Others will break. Permanently.]

[If the wrong scene collapses, a character’s fate may change.]

He swallowed, suddenly aware of how cold the room had become.

“…So one mistake… and someone could be gone?”

[Yes.]

[Emotion is the core of this world. Change enough of it, and even memory becomes unstable.]

“So if I keep acting out of turn… if I keep caring too much…”

[The world will begin to forget what it was meant to be.]

[And in its place, something new will form.]

A beat.

[The price of choice is rewriting fate.]

Yuu leaned back slightly, pulse thrumming in his ears.

The cost of empathy… was rewriting the entire story.

“…I see,” he murmured, voice quiet.

His fists clenched slowly on his knees.

“Then I guess I have no choice but to be careful… or brave.”

The UI pulsed one last time.

[Choose wisely, Protagonist.]

Yuu blinked.

The faint, final message hovered in front of him, steady and soft—too human for something so artificial.

[But... I trust you.]

"…Huh?" he muttered, straightening.

Before he could process it, another message appeared. Simple. Quiet. Intimate.

[I always have.]

Yuu's breath caught.

"…Wait…" he whispered, eyes narrowing. "Who are you?"

The screen didn't respond.

No flicker, no sound.

The interface dimmed gently, dissolving into the air as if it had never been there.

He stood in stunned silence for a moment. Then, exhaling sharply, he raked a hand through his hair and muttered under his breath, "Tch... seriously…"

With the kind of groan reserved only for people burdened with too many questions and not enough answers, Yuu finally stood up, the creak of his chair faint beneath him. The cold floor met his feet as he moved to the door, slipping his phone into his pocket, his mind still swirling with the remnants of that voice—that warmth.

He didn't know why, but it had felt familiar.

[Meanwhile...]

Somewhere far removed from the waking world.

Beyond Kamiyama High.

Beyond the stages and the festivals and the scripts.

In a space that did not belong—

A world adrift in glitched fragments, colors bleeding into static—

She watched.

Half her body flickered in and out of existence, like a projection rendered from memory too corrupted to restore.

Light hair drifting as though underwater, her form outlined by shifting cubes of unstable data.

A ghost caught between emotions and code.

She stood at the edge of the Non-Existence SEKAI, looking through the void, eyes trained on the one who had just left the room.

A slow, almost dreamlike smile curled on her lips.

“I love to see your performance…” she whispered.

Her voice stuttered, glitching, fragmented, like a scratched music box echoing in a broken theatre.

Her eyes glowed faintly.

And though the world around her fell apart, she stayed still, focused.

Watching.

Waiting.

Remembering.

“Please remind me…”

Her voice quivered, barely above a whisper—static laced every syllable like frayed ribbon.
“…how to sing…”

The fragmented SEKAI around her pulsed in response.

Musical notes, distorted and broken, hovered mid-air like dying fireflies.

“…how to dance…”
Her feet moved ever so slightly, a flicker of movement reminiscent of choreography she no longer remembered, as if her body longed to trace steps etched into a soul she no longer owned.

“…how to react…”
Her hand reached forward, curling fingers into the void.

No audience.

No applause.

Just digital wind whispering through empty aisles.

“…how to smile,” she added softly, almost to herself.

Silence.

And then, as if reaching across the fabric of unreality—

“…how to feel.”

Her voice cracked on the last word. Something between longing and pain flashed through her flickering form.

Eyes shimmered with artificial tears—data unable to become water—but still, the weight of emotion pressed against her chest, aching and raw.

She looked up.

Toward the sky that wasn’t a sky.

Toward the world that had left her behind.

Toward him.

“…Remind me again…"

And with that, the glitching lights around her pulsed once—like a heartbeat—and then fell still.

Waiting.

Chapter End Notes

I'm pretty sure there's gonna be questions in this chapter, I will answer them dw. Also, sorry if the chapter is short! I'll make it up for it.

Chapter 26: Just a Normal Day

With the kind of groan reserved only for people burdened with too many questions and not enough answers, Yuu finally stood up, the creak of his chair faint beneath him.

The cold floor met his feet as he moved to the door, slipping his phone into his pocket, his mind still swirling with the remnants of that voice—that warmth.

[You wanted to stay here… Correct?]

That line had lingered long after the interface blinked away, like a whisper scratched into the back of his skull.

Yuu exhaled sharply and muttered to no one in particular, “Let’s just pretend none of that happened…”

He stepped out of his room, blinking against the natural light filtering through the hallway window. The sun was already high—golden and lazy, spilling warmth into the air. The faint sound of a TV show echoed from the living room, accompanied by the clatter of dishes from the kitchen.

“Oh, Yuu,” a voice called over her shoulder. “You’re awake. Good timing. Want to come with me to the supermarket? I could use an extra pair of hands.”

His mother stood by the counter, tying the last knot on a reusable eco bag. She glanced over her shoulder at him—brown hair tucked into a loose ponytail, apron already dusted with flour.

He blinked, surprised by the mundanity of it all.

“…Sure. Yeah. Why not”

Her expression softened just a bit. “You okay? You look pale.”

“Just tired,” Yuu said with a shrug. “Stayed up late.”

“Too much gaming again?” she teased gently, grabbing her wallet from the counter.

He gave a half-hearted smile. “You could say that.”

Yuu stepped back into the house with a soft sigh, the soles of his slippers brushing against the polished floorboards.

The sunlight streaming through the hallway window had shifted slightly, now casting longer shadows that stretched across the corridor.

He rubbed the back of his neck, still feeling the faint humidity clinging to his skin.

“…Guess I should clean up first.”

With a sluggish pace, he wandered toward the bathroom. The door clicked shut behind him, and for a brief moment, the world narrowed to the sound of running water.

Steam began to gather on the mirror as he stepped into the shower, letting the warmth cascade down his back.

It felt grounding.

Fifteen minutes later, towel draped over his shoulders and hair still damp, Yuu stepped into his room and pulled open his closet.

Nothing fancy, just a clean white shirt, dark jeans, and a light jacket. Simple, but enough to pass as presentable.

He gave himself a quick once-over in the mirror.

“Still just me,” he murmured.

Still Yuu Hazuki.

He grabbed his phone, slid it into his pocket, and slung a canvas tote over his shoulder for the groceries. Somewhere in the living room, he could hear his mother calling gently—

“Yuu, ready?” (A/N: Get it? lol)

“Yeah,” he called back, running a hand through his half-dried hair.

As he stepped into the hallway, the day waited for him—normal, quiet, and deceptively peaceful.

Just a normal day.

Or at least, that’s what he told himself.

Until—

“Huh? Isn’t that Ichika-chan?” his mother said, pausing just as they turned the corner into the open-air section of the shopping district.

Yuu looked up from the grocery list in his hands.

His gaze followed hers, just in time to catch a familiar group clustered by a fruit stand.

As soon as his mother called out, the girl at the front turned, followed by the others beside her.

“Huh? Miss Hazuki, and… Hazuki-kun,” Ichika said, surprised but smiling.

Her voice was gentle, familiar in a way that always carried a quiet steadiness.

“Huh? Yuu-kun! Hello~!” Saki beamed, waving both hands.

“Are you helping your mother?” Honami asked, her tone warm, the kind that always felt like a soft afternoon breeze.

“Y-Yeah,” Yuu replied, caught a little off-guard. “Just… tagging along, I guess.”

And then—standing slightly apart from the others, her arms folded and gaze lowered—Shiho gave a small, polite bow. Not a word left her mouth, but the acknowledgment was there.

Yuu dipped his head in return. “…Hello.”

“What are you all doing here?” Yuu asked, adjusting the paper bag in his hands, the plastic handles digging slightly into his fingers.

Ichika was the first to answer, her voice as calm and even as ever. “We’re just hanging out as a group. We finished practice not too long ago.”

“Ahh, I see…”

“We thought we’d stop by the market before heading home,” Honami added, her smile gentle as she held up a small bag of fresh bread. “It’s a rare day when everyone’s free.”

“I just wanted some strawberries!” Saki chimed in, holding up a carton triumphantly. “And we got them on sale, too!”

Shiho remained quiet, standing a little to the side. Her eyes flicked toward Yuu for a moment, but she didn’t speak, her expression unreadable.

Yuu gave a small nod. “Sounds like a good day, then.”

His mother glanced between the teens, a knowing smile on her face. “You’ve made quite a few friends lately, haven’t you, Yuu?”

He rubbed the back of his neck awkwardly. “It’s… not like that.”

But he didn’t deny it, either.

"By the way, atleast introduce them to me." His mother said, "Well, I already know Ichika-san."

Yuu blinked, caught off guard. “Huh? I mean… they’re not—”

“I’m Saki Tenma!” Saki beamed, giving a cheerful wave. “I've been friends with Yuu-kun since that day we met"

“Oh my, so polite! And very pretty too,” Yuu’s mother said with a warm smile.

Yuu stiffened. “Saki—?!”

Honami laughed softly and stepped in before things escalated. “I’m Honami Mochizuki. It’s lovely to meet you, ma’am.”

“And I’m Shiho Hinomori,” came a quiet voice from the back. Shiho gave a respectful bow, her expression cool but polite.

Yuu’s mother took a moment to look at them all, each of them standing there, different personalities shining through in subtle ways. “My, my… you’ve got quite the group around you, Yuu.”

“Again,” Yuu muttered, ears red, “it’s not like that.”

Yuu’s mother chuckled, her tone light and teasing as she looked between the girls. “Of course it’s not,” she said with a smirk, her eyes glinting with a mix of amusement and fondness. “But it’s nice

to see you surrounded by such sweet girls, Yuu. I was starting to think you'd spend your whole youth holed up in your room playing games all day.”

Yuu stiffened like a board. “Mom,” he groaned, his voice cracking with embarrassment. “Please.”

Ichika chuckled softly, brushing a lock of hair behind her ear. “Actually, didn’t you hear, ma’am? Hazuki-kun went viral."

“Ohh~ that’s right!” His mother clapped her hands together in realization. “I saw that video of you playing guitar at the park with someone. That was you, wasn’t it?”

Yuu shifted uncomfortably, running a hand down his face. “Y-Yeah, yeah. That was me. I’ll play you a song when we get home, okay? But let’s please focus on groceries before this becomes a full-blown press conference.”

Saki giggled behind her hand, her eyes sparkling. “Yuu-kun is really good at playing guitar, you know.”

Yuu could only groan, muttering again as he covered part of his face, “Please stop talking…”

Honami smiled warmly, stepping just a bit closer to his mother. “I still remember his first impression, actually.."

Her words were gentle, sincere.

The kind that made even Yuu’s mother pause for a heartbeat, surprised by the affection in the girl's tone.

At the edge of the group, Shiho gave a quiet nod, arms loosely crossed as she added under her breath, “...He’s not bad to have around.”

The words were simple, but coming from her, they held unexpected weight.

Yuu felt the heat crawl up his neck, halfway between wanting the ground to swallow him and being oddly… touched.

His mother tilted her head, smiling with quiet approval as she looked over the girls again—each one unique, yet somehow all comfortably orbiting around her son.

“Well,” she said at last, “it sounds like you’ve made some very special friends, Yuu.”

Yuu let out a breath, shoulders dropping. “Yeah… I guess I have.”

“Anyway, sorry to take your time.”

Yuu muttered, quickly stepping in front of his mother and gently nudging her away from the group with both hands.

“Eh? Yuu-kun? Why are you pushing me?” his mother said in confusion, heels clicking lightly against the pavement as she stumbled back a step. “I still want to talk to Ichika-chan and everyone —”

“Come on, Mom… Let’s go already. You’re killing me inside!” Yuu hissed in a low voice, trying to maintain a sliver of dignity.

His mother blinked, then laughed with the grace of someone who knew exactly what she was doing. “Oh, don’t be so shy.”

As she allowed herself to be steered away, she waved cheerfully over her shoulder with both hands. “Bye, girls! Take care of my son, okay?”

The four members of Leo/need stood rooted in place for a moment, watching Yuu drag himself off like a defeated soldier, ears red and shoulders hunched.

His mother, by contrast, looked utterly triumphant, still smiling as she teased her poor son.

[Switching to Leo/need's POV]

Ichika tilted her head slightly, a quiet smile forming at the corners of her lips. “His mom seems really nice.”

“She’s adorable,” Saki added with a laugh, clasping her hands behind her back. “You can tell she enjoys teasing him. It’s honestly really cute.”

“Can you blame her?” Honami’s tone was soft, her laughter gentle. “Yuu-kun’s reactions are so easy to read. He wears all his embarrassment right on his face.”

Shiho, arms folded, let out a small huff. “He tries to act all cool and detached, but… You can tell. He’s got a soft spot for her.”

“Mm-hm,” Saki nodded, her voice bright, “and honestly? It’s kind of rare to see a guy who walks around shopping with his mom like that.”

Honami smiled. “It’s sweet. And… kind of refreshing, isn’t it?”

Ichika’s gaze lingered down the path where the two Hazukis had gone. The corners of her smile softened into something thoughtful, almost wistful. “It’s not a bad thing,” she said quietly. “Having that kind of connection with someone.”

They stood in companionable silence for a moment, letting the warmth of that thought settle. Around them, the market buzzed with life—vendors calling out, children darting between stalls, the smell of grilled taiyaki and sugar lingering in the air—but none of it intruded on the peaceful pause they shared.

Then, with a light clap of her hands, Saki broke the moment. “Alright! Time to get snacks and hit that café, right?”

“Right,” Honami echoed, her voice light with affection. “Let’s not get too serious now.”

The soft chatter between the four resumed as they strolled through the quiet, sun-dappled sidewalk, the faint scent of baked goods and the sound of distant bicycles weaving into the hum of the town.

Then Ichika turned her head slightly, her voice curious but calm. “By the way, Shiho… it’s kind of surprising. You gave Hazuki-kun some feedback earlier.”

Saki perked up at that, glancing at Shiho with interest. “Oh yeah! You don’t usually say stuff like that to people.”

Honami smiled knowingly but said nothing, letting the silence speak.

Shiho, walking slightly behind them with her arms still loosely crossed, barely looked up. “So?”

Ichika gave a soft chuckle. “I’m not saying it’s bad or anything. I just didn’t expect it. You usually don’t comment on others unless it’s about music.”

Shiho exhaled, a slow breath through her nose. “I only said he wasn’t bad to have around. That’s not exactly praise.”

“But still,” Saki teased with a grin, “coming from you, that might as well be a love confession.”

Shiho shot her a withering side glance. “Don’t be stupid.”

Ichika smiled, tilting her head gently. “You saw something in him, didn’t you?”

There was a pause.

Shiho didn’t answer right away. Her gaze stayed ahead, cool and unreadable. Then, quietly, she muttered, “...He doesn’t fake it.”

“Hm?” Honami blinked.

Shiho stopped walking, just for a second, her voice low and blunt. “When he talks to people, he’s awkward, but it’s honest. It’s not some act. And he didn’t treat me differently.”

She glanced to the side, brushing her bangs behind her ear. “Most people either try too hard or avoid me completely. He didn’t do either.”

The group paused, just slightly, surprised by the uncharacteristic openness.

Ichika’s smile deepened, quiet and warm. “That sounds like something you respect.”

“…I respect people who don’t lie to themselves,” Shiho said simply.

Then she began walking again, expression unreadable, but her pace just a bit lighter.

Saki leaned toward Honami and whispered, “She’s totally warmed up to him.”

“I heard that,” Shiho called back flatly.

The three girls laughed as they caught up to her, their conversation fading back into casual chatter, but something lingered between them. A quiet understanding.

Shiho might not say much.

But when she did—it meant something.

[Back to Yuu Hazuki’s Perspective]

The market noise dulled behind them as Yuu trudged forward, his mother happily at his side, still humming to herself like nothing had happened.

“You could’ve at least waited until they were out of earshot,” Yuu muttered under his breath.

His mother gave him a side glance, all innocence. “What? I was just being friendly.”

“Yeah, well—next time don’t be so friendly. You’re killing me inside.”

She laughed, brushing a stray lock of hair from her face. “You act like I embarrassed you or something.”

“You definitely embarrassed me.”

“Well, you’ll survive,” she replied playfully.

Then, with a casual tone that felt like a curveball, she asked, “By the way, Yuu-kun… do you remember your birthday?”

Yuu blinked. His pace faltered.

“Huh? Ah...” He paused. The question hit harder than he expected. “No... not really.”

“I see…” Her voice softened with memory. “I remember when you were still so small. You were crying to your father, begging him to buy you that toy guitar. But he wouldn’t. You were so upset.”

Yuu’s eyes dropped to the ground. “Mom, that was a long time ago…”

But he remembered.

The memory flared up like an old match catching fire.

He closed his eyes.

And the flashback came.

The air was thick with summer heat, clinging to his skin like a second layer.

The sharp smell of asphalt. The blaring cicadas.

And then—the sting of rejection.

“I hate you, Dad!!”

A boy's voice cracked, high-pitched and trembling with tears. Yuu, no older than ten, bolted through the house’s front gate, sandals slapping against the pavement. His mother’s voice called out behind him, frantic and desperate—

“Yuu! Wait—Yuu!”

But he didn’t stop. He couldn’t.

Anger and heartbreak drove his legs faster than he’d ever run. Through the winding neighborhood, past startled pedestrians, past the vending machines humming softly in the dusk.

And then—

The sky broke open.

Rain poured down without warning, drenching him in seconds. His sandals slipped slightly on the slick pavement, but he didn't care. He didn't know where he was running—only that he had to go somewhere else. Somewhere away from that house.

He didn't stop until he reached the underside of a bridge, the concrete above him muffling the sound of the storm.

Cold water dripped from his hair, his clothes clinging to his skin. He dropped to the ground in a soggy heap, arms wrapped around his knees.

His chest heaved with sobs.

"I hate you…"

His voice barely came out, swallowed by the sound of rain.

But even then… There was no strength in it.

Only a child's hurt.

Only the kind of grief that could come from a dream dashed before it could even begin—before the rhythm, before the music, before he knew how much it would come to matter.

He hugged his knees to his chest, arms trembling as he tried to shield himself from the cold.

Then—

Footsteps.

Slow. Familiar.

He looked up.

A man stood there, holding an umbrella, the rain dripping quietly off the edges.

"I finally found you."

Yuu didn't move. His voice cracked as he answered, low and bitter. "Liar…"

But the man only smiled—soft, regretful—and sat down beside him, letting the umbrella tilt slightly to cover both of them.

"I'm sorry, Yuu," he said gently. "I should've bought you that guitar you wanted."

Yuu stared at him, the words unable to form.

He didn't know if he was angry or just tired.

But in that moment, the sound of the rain above became a soft rhythm against the silence between them.

[Back in the present],

Yuu's fingers twitched at his side, almost as if still clutching the cold fabric of his soaked shirt from years ago.

"…That was the past," he repeated, softer this time. "It doesn't matter anymore."

But his mother only smiled gently at him, as if she knew better than anyone that the past had a way of echoing through the present, no matter how far you tried to run from it.

His mother chuckled faintly, a gentle, almost wistful sound. "Fufu… Should we visit your father after we finish this?"

There was a pause before Yuu responded.

"…Sure," he said quietly. "But can I get something from the house first?"

She nodded without question. "Alright, then."

After their errands were done, the two returned home.

The soft click of the front door sounded behind them as Yuu slipped off his shoes and made his way to his room in silence. His mother watched from the hallway, a quiet smile on her face that didn't quite reach her eyes.

Moments later, he emerged again, something tucked carefully in his arms, wrapped in cloth and carried with an unusual delicacy.

They left again soon after, walking a path far different from the one they'd taken that morning.

The sky had dimmed further, the light now thinner, cooler. Shadows stretched long across the ground as they entered the gates of the cemetery. The world around them grew quiet—eerily so—as if the very air understood where they were going.

The crunch of gravel beneath their feet echoed louder here, punctuating each slow step.

Rows upon rows of gray stone stood in silence, etched with names, dates, and memories that lingered only in the minds of those left behind. The wind stirred the trees overhead, their leaves whispering secrets through rustling branches.

Yuu's steps slowed.

Then stopped.

They had arrived.

He stood there, frozen before the grave, eyes fixed on the polished stone where his father's name was engraved.

His breath caught slightly in his throat.

"…Dad."

No reply, of course.

Only the wind.

He stepped forward, slow and steady, each crunch of gravel beneath his feet echoing louder than it should. His gaze locked on the name carved into the stone—sharp, cold, and unmoving. Yet to him, it held the weight of memories.

“I still remember,” he murmured, his voice almost lost to the breeze. “The way I yelled at you. How I slammed the door. How you didn’t say anything back.”

He closed his eyes.

The memory returned with painful clarity, like a scene forever etched in the corner of his heart.

“I hate you, Dad!”

He saw himself, smaller, angrier, a child with clenched fists and burning eyes. The sound of the front door slamming, the thud of footsteps, the silence that followed. The silence that never ended.

That was the last time he saw his father alive.

“…I never got to take it back,” he whispered.

He felt his mother’s presence behind him—a quiet, unshaken pillar of warmth. She didn’t say anything. She didn’t need to. Her silence was understanding. Forgiving.

The wind blew gently again, as if brushing past him in quiet empathy.

He inhaled deeply, letting the chill sting his lungs, then slowly knelt down in front of the gravestone. Not to pray, exactly. Not even to apologize. Just to be there. To finally look the silence in the eye.

“I brought this,” he said.

From behind him, he carefully unclasped the cloth-wrapped bundle on his back and unzipped it, revealing the acoustic guitar within. It wasn’t anything fancy. Worn, scuffed from practice. But it was his.

He laid it gently in front of the grave, letting the wood rest on the grass like an offering.

“It’s not much. But I thought… you’d want to see how far I’ve come.”

Of course, there was no response.

Just the rustling of leaves above.

He bowed his head slightly. Not from obligation.

But because his chest ached with something he couldn’t put into words.

(Back then… when I lived alone during my college days), he thought (I only thought about myself.)

(My future.)

(My dreams.)

(I didn’t visit Mom… not even you, Dad.)

(I was selfish.)

(I was scared.)

(And I thought I didn’t need anyone.)

He opened his eyes again, breathing in the scent of earth and wind and faintly blooming grass.

(But now… I’m happy.)

A small smile tugged at the corner of his lips, bittersweet and sincere.

(That shitty god… the one who threw me into this world—)

(I don’t know what they want from me).

(But still… for some reason, I’m kind of grateful.)

(I'm grateful to be back.)

He looked up at the sky.

“Thanks for waiting,” he said quietly.

And for the first time in a long time, there was peace in the silence.

Chapter 27: Witnessing the Bright Stars (Part 1) + (Q&A?)

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

Yuu yawned as he stirred awake, the sound muffled beneath the weight of stillness.

Morning.

A soft, hazy glow filtered through the slits in his bedroom curtains, painting faint golden lines across the ceiling.

The air felt warmer than usual—not just in temperature, but in something else. Something gentler. Familiar.

He blinked against the light, his fingers fumbling for the phone resting on his bedside table.
6:05 AM.

“Still early, huh…” he murmured under his breath, voice hoarse from sleep.

He sat up slowly, letting the blanket slip from his shoulders. The mattress gave a quiet sigh beneath him.

For a moment, he remained still, staring at the dust motes dancing in the light.

A strange question drifted across his mind like mist.

“What day is it?”

No answer came.

The thought faded as quickly as it arrived.

He exhaled softly and stood, his bare feet brushing against the cool floorboards.

The silence that followed wasn’t empty; it was lived-in.

Comfortable.

He padded down the hallway and into the kitchen, where the smell of grilled fish and miso soup greeted him like a quiet memory.

“Morning, Mom,” he said, voice steadier now.

His mother didn’t turn from the stove, but her tone was brisk and warm. “Good morning. Your breakfast is on the table. Eat before it gets cold.”

“Yeah,” he replied with a faint nod, already moving toward the seat.

He sat down and looked at the meal—simple, balanced, familiar.

As he picked up his chopsticks, his mother spoke again, casually, as if mentioning the weather.

“By the way, you said your uniform doesn’t fit right anymore, right? Something about how tall you’ve gotten.”

He paused mid-bite, blinking.

“I actually ordered two new sets,” she continued, setting a glass down by the sink. “So you’ll be more comfortable in them.”

Yuu glanced toward her, surprise flickering in his eyes. “…Oh. Thanks.”

“No worries,” she said with a smile that didn’t quite turn around to meet him. “Go check it—it's on the sofa. See if the size works for you.”

“I’ll do that… after I shower,” he replied, offering a faint nod of appreciation.

He returned to his breakfast, chewing quietly.

The miso soup had cooled slightly, but the warmth lingered, just enough to reach the edge of his chest.

He ate in silence, the kind that filled the room like soft steam, not awkward but familiar.

Once he was finished, he rose from the chair and made his way to the living room.

There, neatly folded on the armrest of the sofa, were the new uniforms, pressed, unworn, the fabric still stiff with newness.

He picked them up gently, as if they might crumble at the edges if handled too roughly.

Then, with the bundle in hand, he quietly returned to his room, the soft padding of his footsteps swallowed by the hum of the morning.

He stepped into his room, the morning light now spilling in through the curtains in thin, golden sheets.

Quietly, he placed the folded uniform on his bed, careful not to crease it.

The fabric looked crisp against the rumpled sheets—new against old.

Somehow, the contrast made him pause.

But only for a second.

He turned away, his hand brushing his hair back absently as he headed for the bathroom.

The door clicked shut behind him, and the sound of running water soon followed, faint, distant, like a curtain being drawn over the waking world.

Steam clung to the edges of the mirror, curling like breath held too long.

Beneath the steady cascade of water, Yuu stood motionless, his head tilted forward, letting the warmth run in smooth ribbons down his back and shoulders.

It washed away the lingering weight of sleep, but not the quiet tension nestled just behind his ribs.

The scent of soap and shampoo filled the space—clean, familiar, grounding.

And yet, the stillness around him wasn't peace. It was something else.

A silence not of absence, but of waiting.

When he finally stepped out, the air beyond the bathroom clung to his damp skin—cool, almost sharp in contrast. He toweled his hair dry with slow, absent motions, his mind floating somewhere just behind his eyes.

Back in his room, the new uniform waited for him, untouched and undisturbed, folded neatly at the foot of his bed. He stood in front of it for a moment, towel slung loosely over his shoulders, staring as though it might move on its own.

"…I really did grow," he murmured, brushing a hand along the sleeve.

The fabric was crisp, the stitching tight. Each fold held the scent of fresh laundry, of something unwrapped but never worn. He picked it up, unfolding the shirt with careful fingers, and began to dress.

Button by button.

The fabric sat comfortably across his shoulders—roomy, not suffocating. The sleeves met his wrists without pulling. He rolled his arms experimentally.

Not tight anymore.

It fit.

"Yeah... It's perfect."

He let out another soft yawn, still blinking sleep from his eyes as he turned toward the mirror. With a practiced motion, he lifted his hand and swiped across the air.

A pale-blue holographic UI bloomed to life in the space before him, floating above his reflection. Lines of soft light circled gently, pulsing like a heartbeat.

"I haven't visited the Stage SEKAI yet…" he mumbled, scrolling through the list of worlds. "I'll do that later."

But his hand hovered over the name a moment longer than it should have.

He exhaled slowly.
"Actually… maybe just for a minute."

With a tap, the selection locked in.

The interface flickered once, then vanished.

And so did the room.

The walls peeled away in silence, dissolving into a slow-moving void. Colors bled into nothingness. The floor beneath him shimmered and stretched into pixels before unraveling entirely. The air shifted—soft, then colder, then suddenly laced with vibrant sound.

When he opened his eyes again, the world was no longer his bedroom.

He stood in the middle of an enormous, open stadium, its massive scale breathtaking even in stillness.

Tiered rows of empty seats surrounded a central circular stage, as if anticipating a crowd that hadn't arrived yet. Spotlights hung in the air like unmoving stars.

Around him, platforms, scaffolding, and suspended catwalks framed the space in elegant arcs of chrome and glass.

The main area where he stood was a high-tech control booth, sleek and glowing with quiet light, rows of consoles and screens humming faintly. A perfect view of the grand stage stretched before him, with speakers suspended overhead and spotlights poised like watchful eyes.

It was beautiful.

Too perfect.

“Whoa…”

The word left him in a whisper, carried off by the open air as he stepped forward, his shoes echoing faintly against the polished floor of the tech booth.

“This is… the Stage SEKAI I know from the game.”

He nodded slowly, eyes sweeping across the vibrant scaffolding, the multi-tiered lighting rigs, the golden railings catching the glow of invisible spotlights.

Every detail was larger than life, yet perfectly arranged—theatrical, not in the sense of being fake, but in the way dreams are theatrical: bold, impossible, and completely sincere.

Then he noticed it.

His heart.

It was pounding.

Not in fear or panic, but with something sharper, warmer.

Excitement.

His brow furrowed slightly as he brought a hand to his chest. “Huh…?”

A beat.

Then a quiet realization.

“Ah… right.” He exhaled, barely above a whisper. “I forgot I can feel the emotions of the SEKAI…”

Like a tuning fork echoing with someone else’s longing.

He closed his eyes for a moment, letting the feeling settle into his bones.

Stage SEKAI.

Created by the feelings of Minori Hanasato, Haruka Kiritani, Airi Momoi, and Shizuku Hinomori.

He remembered now—its shimmering lights, the glittering world that reflected their passion, their hope, their pain.

A stage where idols could shine.

And the song that anchored this world—

“Idol Shineitai.”

That was the key.

That was the door.

Even now, he could almost hear its opening chords faintly in the distance, like the memory of a melody caught on the wind.

Yuu stood still, letting the atmosphere of the Stage SEKAI settle around him like falling confetti.

The air shimmered—not with temperature, but with emotion.

It was the kind of silence that felt alive.

Not hollow.

Like the breathless pause before the lights come on.

Before the curtains rise.

Before the first note of a song.

His heartbeat hadn't calmed.

But even now, he wasn’t sure it was entirely his own.

It pulsed in his chest like an echo—borrowed, somehow.

Shared.

He placed a palm flat against his chest, fingertips brushing the fabric of his new uniform.

His brow knitted slightly as he tried to give shape to the sensation.

“Each SEKAI is born from emotion,” he murmured aloud, voice trailing into the open air. It echoed faintly, caught by the high ceilings and empty rows of lights. “That’s what makes them real…”

Real, despite the way their colors were always a little too vivid.

Their skies are still too.

Even their pain—too clean.

Too beautiful.

But they were real.

Because the emotions behind them were.

And Yuu…

Yuu could feel them.

Not metaphorically.

Not with some vague poetic intuition.

Literally.

Every time he entered a SEKAI, something inside him shifted—as if his entire body adjusted to a new emotional frequency.

Like his soul was tuning itself to someone else's song.

A tremble in his chest.

A dull ache behind his eyes.

A flicker of joy he didn’t remember earning.

He stared at his open hand, fingers curling slowly into a fist.

“It’s because… I’m not like them.”

His voice was soft now.

Almost fragile.

“I wasn’t created by a SEKAI. I fell into one.”

A pause.

A truth swallowed dry.

“…No. More like I was dragged into it.”

That was the difference.

They walked into a world that reflected their hearts.

But Yuu…

For him, the walls between worlds were thin.

Blurred.

Like silk soaked in water.

When he stepped into a SEKAI, it wasn't just the setting that changed—it was something inside him.

Something that responded instinctively, resonating with the emotional architecture of the place.

He didn't just see the world.

He felt its soul.

In the Street SEKAI, it was adrenaline, pride, the thundering ache of never being enough.

A fire that said, 'keep going—' even if no one's watching.

In the School SEKAI, it was nostalgia wrapped in the delicate grief of what once was.

Fleeting laughter.

In the Wonderland SEKAI, it was pure, unfiltered joy.

A fragile kind of happiness that sparkled like glass, hollowed out, yet full of color.

In the Empty SEKAI, it was a weight that pressed behind the eyes.

A sadness that didn't scream. It just sat beside you and waited for you to stop pretending.

And here—

Here in the Stage SEKAI—

It was bright.

Hopeful.

Shining.

"This world…" he whispered, eyes lifting to the stage before him, "was made by girls who wanted to shine. Who kept chasing something they weren't sure they could ever reach."

He could feel it in the air, their yearning.

Their dreams, stitched into the velvet curtains and polished into the floor beneath his feet.

It vibrated faintly under his skin, like the low thrum of stage lights warming to life.

Even now, with the seats empty and the spotlight off, this world glowed.

Because someone, somewhere, still believed it could.

Just as he took a step forward, intending to explore more of the vast stage world around him, a sound cut through the quiet.

Voices.

Faint at first—scattered laughter, a burst of melodic humming, and the gentle rhythm of footsteps on stage panels.

Familiar, though not from memory.

From the game.

He turned, the sound anchoring him like a thread pulled taut in the silence.

There, somewhere past the tall rigging, behind a velvet curtain swaying slightly despite the absence of wind.

Yuu's feet moved on their own.

Each step he took was careful, measured.

The lights above seemed to dim slightly as he passed beneath them, casting long shadows behind him.

The floor beneath his shoes echoed faintly—neither loud enough to reveal him nor quiet enough to silence his nerves.

He moved past stacked props and hanging spotlights, through corridors of towering backdrops painted with pastel skies and golden cityscapes.

The voices grew clearer.

Bright.

Confident.

Full of life.

Someone was singing now, softly, warming up their voice.

Another joined in, harmonizing with ease.

A third giggled, breathless, urging them to focus.

A fourth offered gentle encouragement, her tone poised and graceful.

Minori.

Haruka.

Airi.

Shizuku.

They were here.

MORE MORE JUMP!

Yuu's heartbeat, still not entirely his own, quickened again.

He pressed his back lightly to a column, careful to stay in the shadows, and slowly peeked around the edge.

There, beneath a cascade of golden lights, stood the four girls of MORE MORE JUMP!, mid-rehearsal.

And standing just beside them were the Virtual Singers—their own Mikus, their versions, dressed in matching pastel idol outfits, guiding them with soft voices and rhythmic gestures.

The sight before him was surreal.

Not just because it looked like a scene pulled straight from the game, but because it felt alive.

Because the emotion that built this world wasn't static.

It was growing.

And for a moment, Yuu didn't dare move.

He could only watch, like someone who had wandered into a dream he had no right to see.

Slowly—almost reverently—Yuu lowered himself to the floor, his back resting lightly against a column of unused stage rigging.

He sat there, legs drawn slightly in, arms relaxed at his sides, as if afraid the slightest movement might shatter the scene in front of him.

The stadium felt vast and silent around him, but here, in this pocket of golden light, it was alive.

They danced.

Minori's steps were full of energy, her smile wide and radiant even as she moved with practiced precision.

Haruka followed with a calm grace, her posture near-perfect, every movement smooth and deliberate.

She moved like someone who had learned to carry the weight of expectation but hadn't let it crush her.

Airi's movements were sharper, snappier, filled with fire.

Even in rehearsal, she moved like she had something to prove.

But there was joy behind it now.

Not just defiance.

And Shizuku.

There was a gentleness to her, a quiet elegance.

She didn't command attention, but she held it.

Her voice, when she sang, was soft and rich, like light streaming through silk curtains.

The Virtual Singers moved with them, guiding, smiling, harmonizing.

Each one is a reflection of their partner's ideals.

Yuu watched with wide eyes, a subtle smile forming on his lips.

He felt it in his chest again—that warmth.

That resonance. Like he was holding a glowing ember beneath his ribs.

"I'm watching something real…" he thought, awed. "Something that only exists because they wanted it to."

He tilted his head slightly, the soft rhythm of their song drifting through the air. The chorus built slowly, layer by layer, like sunlight rising over a stage curtain.

And in that moment, Yuu felt… lucky.

Like he had stumbled into a private miracle.

Like a child watching stars fall for the first time.

Chapter End Notes

Sorry, got distracted on HSR 3.3 story... It was too peak that it gave me an idea for future plots :>

Also, feel free to ask questions, whether it's personal, writing, story, or plans. I'll answer them with honest thoughts! :D

Chapter 28: Witnessing the Bright Stars (Part 2)

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

And in that moment, Yuu felt… lucky.

Like he had stumbled into a private miracle.

Like a child watching stars fall for the first time—awed, quiet, and completely still.

The music reached its final chorus, their voices rising together, bright and full of life. The synchronized choreography ended with Minori at the center, arms extended toward the imaginary audience, flanked by the others, each glowing under the golden lights.

The final note faded into silence.

For a few heartbeats, no one moved.

Yuu didn't breathe.

Then—

"Eh—!?"

A surprised squeal broke through the stillness.

Yuu flinched.

One of the girls had turned. Haruka.

Her gaze landed directly on him—sharp, wide-eyed—and her entire posture stiffened like someone spotting an unexpected camera flash.

"Someone's here!" she exclaimed, voice edged with alarm.

In an instant, the atmosphere shifted.

The other three members of MORE MORE JUMP! followed her gaze, their heads turning in near-unison toward the side of the stage where Yuu sat, half-hidden in the shadows.

He froze, caught like a stagehand under a spotlight.

Haruka stepped forward instinctively, positioning herself just slightly in front of the others.

Her expression wasn't hostile, but it was cautious, alert. Protective.

"Who are you?" she asked, brows knitting slightly as she narrowed her eyes.

Her voice had that poised edge she always carried, but now it was sharpened by uncertainty.

Minori looked confused.

Airi folded her arms, her stance tense.

Shizuku tilted her head, her gaze curious but unreadable.

And beside them, the Virtual Singers stood still, their expressions more neutral, but focused. Observing.

Yuu felt the heat rush to his face. His mind scrambled for something, anything, to say.

“W-Wait!” Yuu raised his hands slightly as he stepped out from behind the stage rigging, his movement slow and sheepish. “I-It’s me!”

The tension didn’t drop right away. All four girls stared at him in confusion, blinking.

“Huh?” Minori tilted her head. “Aren’t you… the fan? A friend of Kohane-chan?”

Recognition began to light her expression.

“Ohh, you’re right!” Shizuku chimed in, smiling warmly. “It’s Shiho’s friend.”

Airi squinted, her arms still folded. “Huh? But still… how did you end up here?”

Yuu opened his mouth—then hesitated.

“U-Uh…”

He had no answer. Nothing that wouldn’t sound insane or suspicious.

He scratched the back of his head, glancing down at the floor as if it could give him a script.

Then, suddenly—

“Took you long enough, Yuu!”

A cheerful voice cut through the tension like a spotlight.

The others turned.

From the far side of the stage emerged a girl wearing a frilly white dress, the fabric layered and trimmed with delicate lace that shimmered under the lights.

The dress swayed gently with each step, soft and weightless like a breeze in motion.

Her blond hair—cut in a signature bob—framed her face neatly, and atop her head sat a white bow shaped like bunny ears, playful and unmistakably her.

She twirled once as she arrived beside the group, placing a hand on her hip and flashing a bright, expectant smile.

“Hello! I’m sure you know me by now, right?”

Yuu blinked. “Kagamine… Rin.”

“Yeah, yeah!” she laughed. “I was wondering what took you so long to finally enter this SEKAI!”

There was something teasing in her tone, but also knowing.

Haruka stepped slightly forward, glancing between Yuu and Rin with narrowed eyes. “Wait… Rin, do you know him? And… you were expecting him?”

“Huh? That’s right,” Rin replied nonchalantly, her voice as airy as her dress.

“But…” Haruka’s gaze flicked toward Yuu again, cautious and uncertain. “How did he get in here? I thought… You only enter the SEKAI through a song.”

“Yeah, yeah.” Rin twirled a finger before tapping it playfully against her cheek. “But he did listen to the song, right?”

She threw a quick wink toward Yuu.

He froze.

(So… she was trying to cover for him.)

“…Yeah,” he muttered, glancing away. “I did.”

It wasn’t the truth—but it was the answer Rin had given him. And right now, it was the only thing keeping Haruka from demanding more.

Minori let out a small, relieved laugh. “Well, that’s good. I was a little scared we had a real stalker or something…”

“Yeah, seriously,” Airi sighed, brushing a strand of hair behind her ear. “You should’ve said something sooner, you gave Haruka a mini heart attack.”

“I—I didn’t want to interrupt…” Yuu replied honestly, his voice low. “You all looked like you were having fun.”

Shizuku stepped closer, her hands clasped gently in front of her. “Still, it’s not often we get guests here. Especially someone who isn’t part of our SEKAI.”

She tilted her head with a soft smile. “But… if Rin-chan says it’s okay, then I think we can trust you.”

Yuu nodded slowly, grateful—though a small twinge of guilt still pulled at him. It felt wrong, standing here like this. Like a fan who had climbed onto the stage before the performance was over.

Minori bounced lightly on her heels. “You really came all the way here just to watch us practice?” Her eyes sparkled with innocent curiosity. “That’s kind of flattering!”

“Yeah, yeah!” Rin chimed in, spinning beside her. “Yuu’s a special case, after all!”

Haruka, meanwhile, hadn't moved from her spot.

Her arms remained crossed, her expression unreadable.

Unlike the others, she didn’t smile.

Her eyes stayed fixed on Yuu—not hostile, but guarded. Like she was trying to read something he hadn't said yet.

"You still haven't told us how you got here," she said, voice calm but pointed. "Even if you listened to the song… that doesn't explain everything."

The others went quiet.

Rin was the only one who didn't flinch, simply placing a finger over her lips and turning toward Haruka with a sly grin. "Haruka-chan~ you worry too much!"

"I have to," Haruka replied evenly. "It's not normal for someone to appear in a SEKAI without being tied to it."

She looked at Yuu again, her voice soft but firm.

"You're not just some fan who got lucky, are you?"

Yuu swallowed hard.

He felt it—the invisible thread of tension that only Haruka could string so tight.

"I…" he hesitated, eyes drifting toward the stage behind them. "I don't really know what I am yet."

That wasn't a lie.

Not entirely.

Haruka's eyes narrowed just slightly.

But she didn't press further.

"Then don't get in the way of our rehearsal," she said finally, stepping back beside the others. "If you're going to stay here, stay out of the spotlight."

"…R-Right." Yuu bowed his head slightly.

Minori gave Haruka a sidelong glance, then smiled gently at Yuu. "Don't mind her too much. She's just trying to look out for us."

"She's always like that," Airi added, grinning. "Takes everything way too seriously."

"That's why we love her," Shizuku said softly, placing a hand on Haruka's shoulder.

Haruka said nothing, but her gaze lingered on Yuu a few moments longer before finally turning away.

With his head bowed low, Yuu spoke in a quiet, earnest voice.

"I'm really sorry."

The words lingered in the air, heavier than they should've been.

He wasn't just apologizing for sneaking into their rehearsal.
He was apologizing for being here at all.

Minori blinked, then immediately stepped forward. "Ah—no, no! It's okay!" she said, flailing her arms a little. "I mean, it was a bit surprising, sure, but… I'm glad you're here, really!"

Her usual cheer tried to break through her panic, but her foot caught on the edge of the stage and she stumbled slightly—catching herself just in time. "A-Ahaha… You startled us, but you're not bad or anything! Right, guys?"

Airi sighed through her nose, placing a hand on her hip. "He did sneak in, Minori."

"I know," Minori replied, puffing her cheeks slightly. "But he said sorry! He really looks sorry!"

Airi looks at Yuu, as her eyes soften, "Fine. Just don't make a habit of it. You scared the life out of Haruka, you know."

"I'm aware," Yuu said, nodding. "And I won't. I promise."

Shizuku approached more calmly, her smile gentle. "You're not the first to get a little lost between worlds," she said thoughtfully. "And you're probably not the last. Still, it's… unusual."

She paused for a moment before adding, "Just try not to sneak around. If you'd said hello earlier, we could've invited you properly."

"I didn't want to interrupt," Yuu replied, rubbing the back of his neck. "You were all… amazing. It didn't feel right to get in the way."

For a heartbeat, silence returned.

Haruka still hadn't spoken.

She stood just slightly behind the group now, her arms crossed, her gaze still trained on him—steady, unwavering.

Minori turned toward her hesitantly. "Haruka…?"

Haruka's lips parted, but her voice was quiet. "You're still hiding something."

Yuu looked up, startled.

"I can tell," she continued, stepping forward now. Her tone wasn't accusatory, but it held a weight that couldn't be brushed aside. "You're not just a fan. You're not just lost. And even if Rin wants to cover for you, I'd rather know who's watching us from the shadows."

Rin, still beside the group, pouted dramatically. "Ehh, Haruka-chan, you're so stiff. Can't we just have a mysterious guest this one time?"

Haruka didn't flinch. "Not when it comes to what we've worked for."

Minori looked between them, torn. "He really doesn't seem like a bad guy…"

"I'm not," Yuu said softly. "At least… I'm trying not to be."

Haruka's eyes didn't leave his. But after a long pause, her posture eased—slightly.

"I'll trust you," she said at last, "but only as long as you don't betray that trust. If you're really here to watch and support idols… then stand where the audience belongs. Don't sneak backstage."

Yuu nodded firmly. "Understood."

Haruka turned away, the conversation over—for now.

The group slowly returned to their positions as the music began again. Yuu sat back down, this time further out of view, his heart beating with quiet relief and something else.

Gratitude.

Not just for being allowed to stay.

But for being seen.

The music started again.

A soft, dreamy instrumental at first—bright piano chords, accompanied by a gentle electronic beat that built like sunrise. The stage lights responded almost instinctively, blooming into pinks and soft yellows as the girls began their routine once more.

Yuu sat at the edge of the stage, knees pulled slightly up, watching them with quiet awe. Beside him, Rin sat cross-legged, arms resting on her lap, swaying gently to the rhythm.

"They really are amazing…" Yuu said under his breath.

Rin grinned. "Told you."

His eyes lingered on Haruka for a moment. "They're all different… but together, it works."

"That's what makes them special," Rin replied. "They don't fit into a single mold, but when they're on stage together… they shine."

Yuu tilted his head slightly. "Minori's the center, right?"

"Yup! She's the one who brought them all together." Rin smiled fondly. "She's still growing, but that's what people love about her. That clumsy determination? That genuine smile? It's impossible not to cheer for her."

Yuu's gaze softened. "She reminds me of Kohane."

He looked toward Airi and Shizuku next.

"Airi seems really protective."

"She is," Rin said. "She's the big sister type—even if she acts tough, she's got a soft spot for her team. Especially Minori."

"And Shizuku?"

“Elegant,” Rin said. “But she’s learning to be more than just perfect. She used to hide behind a polished image. Now, she’s starting to perform as herself. That takes courage, you know.”

Yuu’s gaze returned to Haruka.

“…She’s still not sure about me.”

“Haruka-chan’s hard to win over,” Rin admitted. “She’s serious about being an idol. She used to be the brightest one on stage—but that light came with pressure. Now, she’s working to find her own rhythm again.”

Yuu nodded slowly.

He could feel it—the intensity behind Haruka’s every move.
The unspoken need to meet an invisible standard.

“She’s not dancing for the audience,” Yuu murmured. “She’s dancing for something she hasn’t caught up to yet.”

Rin looked at him, surprised for a moment. Then, she smiled.

“You get it.”

The rehearsal ended on a sharp, synchronized pose—the music fading out as the stage dimmed.

Minori burst into laughter, breathless and happy. “We almost got it that time!”

“Still a little shaky on the third turn,” Airi pointed out, but she was smiling too.

“We’ll keep practicing,” Haruka said, brushing her bangs aside. “We can make it perfect.”

Yuu looked down at his hands.

Watching them… made something stir inside him.

Not envy. Not admiration, even.

But a feeling he couldn’t name yet.

As the girls began chatting among themselves and cooling down from rehearsal, Yuu remained seated at the stage's edge beside Rin. The warmth of the music still lingered in the air, soft and fading—like the last glow of stage lights dimming behind velvet curtains.

Yuu glanced at her out of the corner of his eye.

“…By the way,” he said, voice low. “How’s the search going?”

Rin tilted her head. “Search?”

“For the non-existence SEKAI,” he said quietly. “And the… glitching Miku.”

Her playful hum stopped mid-note.

Yuu turned fully toward her now. “All the Virtual Singers in each SEKAI… they were working together on it, right? You, Luka, MEIKO, Kaito, Len, and the others?”

Rin didn’t answer right away.

Her legs had been swinging gently off the edge of the platform. Now they stilled.

The playful gleam in her eyes faded—just slightly—and was replaced by something more thoughtful. Her head tilted down, golden bob catching the light like strands of spun honey.

“You’ve been paying more attention than I thought,” she murmured.

Yuu didn’t reply.

The silence between them changed. It wasn’t tense—but it was no longer light.

“…You’re right,” Rin finally said. Her voice had a softness now, careful and precise. “All of us—the Virtual Singers tied to each SEKAI—we’ve been gathering pieces. Signs.”

“Signs of what?” he asked.

“Cracks,” she said simply. “Thin ones. In the seams between SEKAIs. They don’t make sense, but they’re there."

Yuu’s hand curled slightly in his lap. “And the glitching Miku… she’s not part of any SEKAI?”

“She doesn’t belong anywhere,” Rin replied, eyes still distant. “We don’t even know if she’s a Miku at all. Every time we try to trace her, she disappears like a corrupted file. Just... blinks out.”

Yuu exhaled slowly.

He could feel the echo of that static in his memory.

Rin’s gaze slid back toward him. “Why ask now?”

“I’ve seen her,” Yuu admitted. “In that place, where the non-existence SEKAI was. She spoke to me.”

Rin blinked. “She spoke?”

Yuu nodded.

Rin went quiet again. Her hands gripped the edge of the platform tightly—tighter than before.

“Then we need to be careful,” she said softly. “Because if she’s talking to you… it means she knows who you are.”

“Well…” Yuu leaned back slightly, stretching his arms overhead with a quiet sigh. “I hope she’s doing alright there.”

Rin blinked, looking at him.

His voice wasn’t loaded with fear or suspicion. Just a kind of… gentleness. As if he weren’t talking about a threat, but someone lost. Someone lonely.

Even though the glitching Miku was wrapped in mystery—disconnected, unstable, unreadable—he still hoped she was okay.

Rin tilted her head, a soft smile tugging at her lips. “You’re weird, Yuu.”

“Everyone keeps saying that.”

“But…” she added, gaze drifting upward toward the bright artificial sky of the SEKAI, “maybe that’s why she noticed you.”

He said nothing.

The sound of laughter from the others floated over to them—Minori joking with Airi, Shizuku patiently explaining something technical that she clearly didn’t understand, and Haruka… still observing.

Still calculating.

The stage lights dimmed a little, signaling a break in rehearsal.

Rin stood up with a light hop, hands behind her back. “Wanna go talk to them?”

Yuu hesitated, then slowly got to his feet.

“…Yeah,” he said quietly. “Let’s go.”

As Rin and Yuu approached, Minori was the first to notice.

“Ah—Yuu-kun!” she called, waving both arms in her usual energetic way. “Come sit with us! Don’t just watch from the sidelines!”

Yuu blinked, unsure if she was serious. “…Are you sure?”

“Of course!” she said brightly. “It’s not every day we get a visitor from outside our SEKAI. More and more reasons to hang out!”

Airi smirked, tossing him a water bottle. “Yeah, why not. As long as you’re not gonna start critiquing our footwork or something.”

He caught the bottle clumsily, nearly fumbling it. “I wouldn’t dare.”

“Good.” She gave him a quick nod, brushing off imaginary dust from her shoulder. “Then you pass the vibe check.”

Shizuku offered him a soft smile as he sat down beside them, carefully choosing a spot just slightly apart. “You really were watching the whole time, weren’t you?”

Yuu nodded. “Yeah… You were all amazing. Like… really amazing.”

Minori beamed. “Hehe, thank you! We’re still far from perfect, though. I messed up the third turn again…”

“You did great,” Airi said, her voice casual but sincere.

“Mm. I agree,” Shizuku added. “You smiled all the way through.”

Minori flushed slightly, scratching her cheek. “T-thank you…”

Yuu sat quietly for a moment, watching the way they talked to each other—not as idols performing for fans, but as friends, teammates.

People who had found strength in each other.

Then his eyes flicked to the side.

Haruka was standing a little ways off, sipping from a water bottle, watching the group with a neutral expression.

She hadn’t spoken since rehearsal ended, but her gaze occasionally shifted toward Yuu.

She was listening. Measuring.

Minori followed his glance. “Ah—Haruka-chan! Come join us!”

Haruka looked over.

There was a brief silence… then she approached, each step quiet and composed.

She sat beside the others, but said nothing.

Her posture was still poised, as if she were waiting for a moment that hadn't come yet.

Yuu glanced down. “…I still feel bad for intruding earlier.”

Haruka’s gaze landed on him.

“If you really mean that,” she said quietly, “then prove it.”

He blinked. “Prove it?”

She nodded. “Keep watching us. Learn what it means to shine on stage.

Not just from the spotlight—but from behind it, too.”

Yuu held her gaze for a long moment.

“…Alright,” he said softly. “I will.”

Haruka turned away, taking another sip of water. “Good.”

Minori gave him a thumbs-up with a bright grin. “You’ll love it here. I’m sure of it!”

Rin giggled beside him, whispering under her breath, “Look at you, already part of the team.”

Yuu didn’t reply.

But a small smile tugged at the corner of his lips.

As the others laughed about something Airi had said—something about Haruka's strict rehearsal schedule and her secret pastry stash hidden in her school bag—Minori leaned in just a little closer to Yuu.

So close that her shoulder brushed against his.

"By the way, Yuu-kun," she whispered, her voice barely above the hum of conversation, warm and feather-light against his ear, "do you want to exchange numbers?"

Yuu blinked.

"Huh?"

Minori giggled behind her hand, as if she'd just asked something mischievous. "For texting, I mean! You're friends with Kohane-chan, right? It'd be nice if we could talk outside too! You know—more and more chances to chat!"

Her phone was already in her hand before he could process her words.

Her eyes were sparkling with honest, youthful joy. There was nothing forced about it—just genuine excitement. The kind that made people want to smile back.

Yuu felt heat creep to his ears. "Ah… sure. But…"

He rubbed the back of his neck, averting his gaze slightly. "I… don't have my phone with me."

Minori's eyes widened. "Oh—!"

But instead of getting awkward, she simply giggled again and leaned even closer, cupping her hand like she was sharing a sacred idol secret.

"Then… when you're back in the real world, find my socials," she whispered. "DM me the keyword…"

She leaned in just a bit more, breath soft.

"…'Idol's Pancake Mission.'"

Yuu blinked, trying not to laugh. "You… made that up just now, didn't you?"

Minori grinned, pulling back with a sparkle in her eyes. "Maybe~"

Just then—

"Ahhh! What are you two whispering about over there!?" Airi's voice cut through the soft moment like a snap.

Yuu jolted slightly. Minori squeaked.

Airi marched over, arms crossed with a raised brow. "Minori, I know that face. You're up to something."

Minori waved her hands defensively. "N-No, no! We were just talking about... pancakes!"

“…Pancakes?” Airi repeated flatly.

Minori nodded far too quickly. “Yup! Idol pancakes!”

Airi narrowed her eyes. “...You’re weird. But okay.”

From across the group, Shizuku tilted her head thoughtfully. “Is that the one with whipped cream and strawberries… or the one with honey butter?”

“Both!”

Haruka, still sipping her water, gave them a sidelong glance. “Pastries again, Minori?”

Minori yelped, straightening up. “Ah—No! I mean—yes? But not like that!”

Everyone burst into laughter—except Haruka, who simply smiled faintly behind her bottle.

Yuu exhaled, shoulders relaxing as the moment passed.

He didn’t belong here, not truly.

But somehow…

They let him in anyway.

Chapter End Notes

Did I nail the MMJ's personality?

Chapter 29: First Glance of Miyamasuzaka Girls' Academy

Chapter Summary

Man, I can't believe I'm writing this while doing Mirror Dungeon in Limbus Company...

Yuu blinked as soft morning light slipped through the edges of his curtains, washing the room in a pale, golden hue. No flickering spotlights. No shimmering haze of a pastel sky. No heartbeat echoing from someone else's dreams.

This wasn't a SEKAI.

It was reality.

And yet, somehow, the transition felt more surreal.

He was still in his school uniform—the same one he'd slipped into before being pulled into the Stage SEKAI. The faint scent of soap still clung to the collar, a quiet reminder that the earlier rehearsal hadn't been a dream.

He stretched lightly, then moved with practiced ease: phone, wallet, bag.

All accounted for.

He slung the strap over his shoulder as he stepped toward the door.

"I'm going now, Mom."

"Yeah, take care!" her voice called back from the kitchen, casual and comforting.

He stepped into the genkan, shoes lined neatly against the wall. Slipping them on, he paused for a brief moment, his gaze flicking back toward the hallway.

Just for a second, it almost felt like someone had followed him from the SEKAI.

But the house was still.

Quiet.

Normal.

He exhaled.

"…Right. Time for school."

He opened the door and stepped outside.

The air was warm with the early breath of summer, cicadas just beginning their morning chorus. The streets were already beginning to fill with the sound of footsteps and bicycle wheels and the occasional bark of a dog chasing after nothing in particular.

He walked with a steady pace toward Kamiyama High, letting the rhythm of the world sink back into him, ordinary, grounding.

That was, until—

As he neared the school gate, something unusual caught his eye.

Standing just outside the entrance—hands on his hips, his expression full of theatrical frustration—was none other than…

"Tsukasa-senpai…?"

Yuu blinked.

Then blinked again, just to be sure.

Standing right at the front gate of Kamiyama High, drawing subtle whispers and second glances from passing students, was none other than Tsukasa Tenma.

Tall, unmistakable, and slightly out of place, Tsukasa stood upright with his school bag in one hand, glancing around with a mix of focused intent and mild discomfort. His usual confident air was still there—but muted. Quieter. More… normal.

Yuu slowed his steps as he approached.

"…Good morning, Tsukasa-senpai."

Tsukasa turned, straightening as he recognized the voice. A smile broke across his face—relieved, if a little sheepish.

"Ah, Hazuki-kun," he greeted. "Good morning."

Yuu tilted his head, unsure whether to prepare for a full monologue or something more grounded. "What are you doing here? Shouldn't you be in class?"

Tsukasa let out a quiet breath, shifting his weight slightly as he rubbed the back of his neck. "Yeah, about that… Something came up this morning."

His tone wasn't dramatic. If anything, it carried the familiar weight of someone trying not to make a big deal out of something that kind of was.

"What happened?"

Tsukasa held up the school bag, his brows knit in concern. "It's… a mix-up. With textbooks."

Yuu raised an eyebrow.

"Saki-chan asked to borrow a few of my old Kamiyama textbooks yesterday," Tsukasa explained. "She wanted to compare them with the ones she's using now at Miyamasuzaka. I gave her mine,

but—”

He opened the bag and pulled out a thin book with a soft pink cover.

“…she gave me these back this morning.”

Yuu looked down at it. The design was definitely from Miyamasuzaka Girls’ Academy. Elegant, clean, and printed in a softer palette than Kamiyama’s more functional covers.

“So, you’re heading there now to return them?” Yuu asked.

Tsukasa nodded, frowning slightly. “Yeah. But…”

He hesitated, eyes flicking toward the crowd of students still streaming into Kamiyama’s gate.

“I… kind of don’t want to walk into a girls’ school by myself. Not in my uniform. That’ll look weird, won’t it?”

Yuu let out a small laugh before quickly softening it into a reassuring smile. “Fair enough.”

“I know it’s silly,” Tsukasa added, chuckling a little to himself, “but I’d rather not be that guy.”

Yuu shifted his bag on his shoulder and nodded. “Alright, I’ll go with you.”

Tsukasa blinked. “Really?”

“Yeah,” Yuu replied. “Might as well. It’s on the way, sort of.”

The tension in Tsukasa’s shoulders eased immediately. “Thanks, Hazuki-kun. That’d help a lot.”

He started walking, slower than usual. Yuu followed alongside.

The sun was still climbing over the rooftops, casting a warm orange glow across the street as the two boys moved away from Kamiyama’s gate and toward the quiet hill that led to Miyamasuzaka’s tree-lined campus.

Yuu smiled to himself, eyes on the road ahead.

But inside, his thoughts were already spiraling.

…Wait, wasn’t this supposed to be an area conversation with Ichika-san instead?

…Oh well. Guess I’ll improvise.

After several quiet minutes beneath the golden spill of early sunlight, the two boys finally reached the gates of Miyamasuzaka Girls’ Academy.

The walk had carried them uphill along a tree-lined road, where the breeze stirred the leaves in soft rustles and cast dappled shadows across their path.

The sun had risen higher now, gilding the tops of the school’s white walls and catching faint reflections in the ironwork of the front gate, which stood wide open in gentle invitation.

Yuu slowed to a stop as they reached the front.

His eyes lifted.

There was a stillness here.

One that didn't exist at Kamiyama High.

Not empty or stiff—just composed.

Like the campus itself was holding its breath in quiet discipline.

Yuu stared up at it for a moment, blinking.

It looked exactly like it did in the game.

And yet… not.

Tsukasa came to a slow stop beside him, his steps uncertain now. "…What now?" he asked, glancing over at Yuu with the quiet nerves of someone trying not to look out of place.

Yuu crossed his arms. "Well… this is actually my first time visiting the outside of this school."

Tsukasa's brows rose. "You've never been here before?"

Not in this world, Yuu thought. Only through a screen.

He shook his head. "Nope."

Tsukasa tapped the folder against his chin, brows drawn slightly in thought. "Huh… That makes two of us, then."

He didn't press further.

But Yuu could feel it—Tsukasa's usual theatrical confidence dimmed by the unfamiliarity. He was out of his element, and even he knew it.

A few students from Miyamasuzaka passed by, casting quick glances at the unfamiliar boys standing just beyond the gate.

Whispers floated between them like petals caught in the wind.

"Are they from Kamiyama?"

"Did something happen?"

The whispering wasn't malicious, but it was enough to make Yuu shift his weight, suddenly aware of how out-of-place they looked in their uniforms.

"…We're standing out," he muttered, glancing sideways.

Tsukasa cleared his throat, straightening his back like he was preparing for a press conference. "I-I'll explain things. Properly."

Yuu raised a brow. "You sure?"

“Positive,” Tsukasa said with a nod, voice more composed this time. “This is just a textbook hand-off, after all.”

He took a deep breath and began walking forward again—shoulders back, eyes ahead.

“Huh? If it isn’t Hazuki-kun… and Tsukasa-san? What are you doing at Miya Girls…?”

The voice rang out—soft, clear, and unmistakably familiar.

Yuu froze mid-step.

That voice.

He didn’t need to turn to know who it belonged to.

The tension in his shoulders, taut like coiled wire since they reached the gate, loosened in an instant. His breath left him in a quiet sigh, as though someone had gently deflated a balloon.

Finally, he thought, a flicker of relief passed through him.

An area conversation.

That meant this moment was part of the usual flow.

A scene designed to trigger at the right time. Dialogue, interaction, resolution. Just follow the cues, say the lines, and then—

“We can finally go back to Kamikou once this is done,” he murmured under his breath, a faint, knowing smile on his lips.

But as he and Tsukasa turned to face the speaker, that calm unraveled.

Standing just beyond the white gate, framed by the morning light, were two girls in the signature Miyamasuzaka Girls’ Academy uniform.

Hoshino Ichika.

And beside her, Hinomori Shiho.

Together.

Yuu blinked.

Once.

Twice.

His brain stuttered like a skipping track.

This… wasn’t right.

Ichika and Shiho? Together? Now?

That wasn’t part of the game’s scripted flow.

Tsukasa was caught off guard by them.

“Ah… Hoshino-san. And… Shiho-san, right?”

Shiho gave a brief nod, calm and composed. “Yes. Good morning.”

Ichika offered a warm smile, stepping forward. “Are you two here to visit someone?”

Tsukasa cleared his throat, regaining his poise. “Actually, I’m just returning some textbooks that got… accidentally swapped. With Saki-san.”

“Kamiyama High textbooks?” Ichika echoed, brows lifting in mild surprise.

Tsukasa nodded, holding up the folder. “She told me she wanted to compare her new materials with the ones I used last year. I lent her a few books, but this morning, I found that the ones she returned were from Miyamasuzaka.”

“I see…” Ichika glanced toward the gate thoughtfully.

Shiho let out a small, exasperated sigh. “That sounds like something Saki would do.”

“If you’d like,” Ichika offered, her tone gentle, “I can deliver them to her for you.”

Tsukasa’s shoulders eased. “That would help quite a lot. I’d rather not cause… misunderstandings.”

“I understand,” Ichika said with a knowing smile. “I’ll let Saki know to be more careful next time.”

As she stepped forward to take the folder, Shiho’s eyes flicked toward Yuu.

And lingered.

Her gaze narrowed slightly. “What’s with your face?”

Yuu stiffened.

She’d caught the subtle twitch in his expression—the cracks in the calm.

He cleared his throat quickly, flipping the mental switch.

Time to activate the [Genius of Acting].

“No, I was just…” he said, voice smooth, “admiring how you two look cute in your uniforms.”

Shiho’s eyes widened ever so slightly.

A faint blush crept across her cheeks before she turned away with a quiet huff.

“…Come on, Ichika. We’ll be late if we keep standing around.”

Ichika blinked at her, then laughed softly. “Alright.”

She turned back to Tsukasa with a nod and gently took the folder from his hands.

“Thank you. I’ll make sure it gets to her.”

Tsukasa gave a small bow. “Much appreciated.”

As the two girls stepped past the gate and toward the campus beyond, Yuu watched them go, still processing, still wondering.

The iron gate of Miyamasuzaka Girls’ Academy drifted closed behind them with a soft click, the sound echoing faintly against the stone walls.

With the school now at their backs, Yuu and Tsukasa made their way down the gently sloping hill.

The distant chatter of students faded behind them, swallowed by the hush of morning wind and rustling leaves.

Overhead, sunlight filtered through the trees in soft ribbons of gold, and the paved path ahead stretched quietly, familiar and peaceful.

For a few minutes, neither of them said anything.

The silence wasn’t awkward—just still.

Like the world itself was taking a breath.

Then, as they turned a curve in the road, Tsukasa exhaled through his nose and spoke.

“…Cute in their uniforms?” he said, tilting his head, the corners of his mouth twitching.

Yuu blinked, then looked away with a small huff of breath that sounded suspiciously like a laugh.

Tsukasa leaned forward slightly, eyes narrowing in mock accusation. “Hazuki-kun, I must admit—I didn’t expect that line from you.”

There it is again, Yuu thought.

That voice.

That theatrical air is returning like clockwork.

He’s back.

Yuu fought the urge to smile and rolled his eyes instead. “It was the first thing that came to mind.”

“A spontaneous line born from emotion!” Tsukasa declared, dramatically placing a hand on his chest. “Truly, you have a gift for the stage!”

“Please don’t say that,” Yuu muttered, dryly.

Tsukasa grinned. “No need to be shy! You managed to catch even Hinomori-san off guard.”

“She glared at me.”

“While blushing,” Tsukasa countered with a wink.

Yuu groaned softly, pressing a hand to his face.

Their steps fell into rhythm again, comfortable now, as if the moment at the gate had been folded away into memory.

"…Thanks for coming with me," Tsukasa said after a pause, voice softer now. "I know it wasn't your problem."

Yuu glanced over.

For once, there wasn't any flair in his expression. Just a sincere smile.

Yuu shrugged lightly. "I didn't mind."

The breeze passed between them again, cooler now, as the quiet hum of morning traffic slowly filled the streets ahead.

And with it came the subtle sense that something in the day had shifted.

Not dramatically.

Not suddenly.

But gently.

By the time the two of them reached Kamiyama High, the clock was already inching toward third period.

They slipped into the side entrance, shoes squeaking softly against the polished hallway floors, the muffled sound of lessons filtering through the nearby classrooms.

Neither of them rushed.

There wasn't much point.

Yuu's bag felt lighter now, though he hadn't taken anything out.

Just a different kind of weight shifting.

As they turned down the corridor that led to their respective classrooms, Tsukasa gave a small wave. "Well then, until next time, Hazuki-kun."

Yuu nodded. "Yeah. See you later."

And with that, Tsukasa vanished around the bend, humming some theatrical melody under his breath.

Yuu lingered for a second longer, then stepped back into the steady rhythm of the school day. His hand reached for the classroom door, silent, routine.

But in his mind, a quiet thought surfaced.

…I guess Tsukasa-senpai and I are a little closer now?

He didn't say it aloud.

He just allowed the corners of his lips to lift faintly as he opened the door and slipped into class.

Chapter 30: Supporting the Stars (Part 1)

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

The afternoon sun poured gently through the window, casting long golden streaks across the floor of Yuu's bedroom.

Dust motes danced slowly in the quiet light, drifting like tiny lanterns through the still air.

A faint breeze slipped past the curtain, brushing the fabric so it swayed with the steady rhythm of a resting heartbeat.

Yuu leaned back in his chair, arms stretching above his head with a slow sigh.

His body still carried the faint ache of the rhythm stages he'd cleared that morning, muscles sore in the best way, fingers slightly tingling from the intensity of his last session.

He hadn't visited a SEKAI today.

Not yet.

But he didn't feel in a hurry.

Some days felt like the world pressed too tightly against him—its colors, its silence, the weight of its eyes.

But today was quiet.

Still.

He reached for the water bottle on his desk, its plastic sides cool beneath his fingers, and took a small sip.

His eyes scanned the room lazily: a stack of notebooks on the corner of the desk, yesterday's uniform draped neatly over the chair by the wall, the faint glow of his phone screen resting idle on the tabletop.

"Holidays are kinda boring…" he muttered to no one in particular, letting the silence answer for him.

A moment later, he reached for his phone.

His thumb traced the edge of the screen as he scrolled idly through his contacts—names he'd organized and tagged more carefully than before. Familiar faces. New friendships.

Then he stopped.

Minori Hanasato.

He blinked, lips parting slightly as his gaze lingered on the name. A memory surfaced: bright eyes, louder laughter, an almost blinding determination that clung to every word she spoke.

“I wonder what they’re up to now…” he murmured, tilting his head back to look at the ceiling, his voice trailing off like an unfinished thought.

And then—

Brr-brrr.

His phone vibrated softly across the wooden desk, the sound light, almost shy.

Yuu blinked again and leaned forward, setting the bottle aside.

Minori.

He stared for a second. Then tapped the green icon and brought the phone to his ear.

“Hello?”

“Yuu-kun?” Minori’s voice came through bright and slightly breathless, like she’d just run up a flight of stairs. “Ah! Good! I didn’t catch you at a bad time, did I?”

He leaned back in his seat, a soft smile tugging at the corner of his lips. “No, I was just taking a break. What’s up?”

“Haha~ Nothing! I just wanted to check up on you!”

“…Ah. I see…”

There was a pause on the line—not an awkward one, but the kind of silence that felt natural.

Then Minori’s voice returned, gentler now. “You sounded a little surprised.”

Yuu shifted in his chair, resting an elbow on the desk and leaning his cheek against his knuckles.

A faint smile tugged at the corner of his mouth.

“I guess I didn’t expect a call out of the blue.”

“Sorry! I just thought… you’ve been meeting so many people lately, and I wasn’t sure if you’d forgotten about us.”

“No way, it’s just been… a lot. You know how strange things have been."

"Mhm, I figured. So… have you been watching our lives?”

“Of course.”

“Really?”

“You guys are really amazing.”

There was a gasp on the other end—high-pitched and genuine—followed by the sound of papers fluttering, like she'd bumped into something or spun around mid-call.

"Ehh?! You should've said hi!"

Yuu chuckled, scratching the back of his neck. "I didn't want to interrupt… or sneak backstage. I didn't want people to think I was some creep or stalker or something."

He could almost hear her puff out her cheeks on the other end.

"You're not a creep! You're our friend, you know."

He didn't answer right away—but his silence wasn't from doubt.

Just… surprise.

That someone said it out loud.

"So? How's MMJ doing?" Yuu asked gently, his voice low with genuine curiosity.

For a moment, silence answered him.

Not the comfortable kind from before, this one felt thinner.

Fragile, even. Like something just beneath the surface had shifted.

He could hear Minori breathing quietly on the other end. Not speaking. Not moving. Just… holding something back.

The brightness that had colored her voice moments ago seemed to fade, like a cloud slipping over the sun.

"…We're doing our best."

Yuu straightened in his chair, instinct sharpening at the subdued tone. "That… doesn't sound like a yes."

There was a tiny, almost sheepish laugh on the other end.

But it didn't carry her usual energy.

It sounded tired.

Worried.

"I guess I can't lie to you, huh?"

Yuu didn't reply.

He waited.

Patiently.

Minori exhaled slowly.

“We’re okay, really. Airi-chan and Shizuku-chan are doing their best to keep things steady. We’re still rehearsing, still smiling, still giving it our all…”

She paused again.

Then, softly—almost like it hurt to say:

“…But Haruka-chan hasn’t been doing so well lately.”

Yuu frowned, Is she hurt?”

“No… not physically, It’s just… she’s been more strict than usual with herself. More serious. Quiet. She stays late, running choreo by herself. She keeps practicing, keeps pushing herself past the point where it’s healthy. Even when we ask her to stop. Even when we tell her she’s doing enough.”

“Did you talk to the manager about it?”

There was hesitation again.

“Ayaka-san… knows, I think. But she’s really busy with scheduling and interviews lately. She says Haruka’s a professional, and that she’ll be fine if we give her space.”

Yuu leaned back in his chair, eyes falling shut.

Saitou Ayaka.

He remembered the name now—MMJ’s official manager.

“…I see.”

Minori stayed quiet for a beat longer.

Then, softly—tentatively:

“Yuu-kun… can I ask you something kind of weird?”

“Go on?”

On the other end of the line, Minori inhaled softly—then spoke, her voice a little rushed, like she’d been holding it in.

“I’m not forcing you or anything, really! But… would you be willing to become Ayaka-san’s assistant manager?”

“I mean…” Minori hesitated, then continued with a burst of nervous energy, “Ayaka-san’s been so swamped lately! She’s juggling interviews, scheduling, training, transportation—everything! And it’s been getting harder and harder for her to keep up, even if she doesn’t show it. I told her she should consider hiring an assistant, and—well—I was going to recommend you.”

There was a pause.

“…That kind of sounds like you already planned this,” Yuu said dryly.

A sheepish giggle filtered through the speaker. “M-Maybe just a little…”

Yuu leaned back into his chair, fingers drumming faintly against the desk. His brows furrowed—not out of annoyance, but thought.

The idea was sudden.

Ridiculous, even.

Him? A manager?

But then, his mind conjured the image of Haruka.

Yuu exhaled quietly, eyes drifting toward the sunlight pooling on the floor.

"…I don't think she'd approve," he murmured.

"Huh?"

"Haruka," he clarified. "If she's already pushing herself this hard, I doubt she'd welcome some outsider suddenly stepping in to help. Especially someone like me."

Minori was quiet for a moment.

Then she said, gently:

"She'll understand. Eventually. I think deep down, Haruka-chan doesn't hate help. She's just forgotten what it looks like."

Yuu stayed silent.

The sunlight through the window had shifted, stretching across his desk in pale amber stripes. His fingers rested lightly on the phone, unmoving, his gaze fixed somewhere distant—somewhere past the walls of his room.

He let the quiet linger a moment longer, then finally said, "First… talk to your manager. If your manager agrees, then I'll do it."

There was a sharp inhale on the other end—Minori's surprise bleeding into joy.

"Yeah! That sounds great! Thank you, Yuu-kun!"

He leaned back again, closing his eyes with a sigh that wasn't quite tired, just grounded.

"…Don't thank me yet."

"Alright! I'll call you again!" Minori's voice rang with cheerful certainty.

"Yeah, yeah…" Yuu murmured, a faint smile tugging at his lips despite himself.

The call ended with a soft click. The screen dimmed, and the room returned to stillness.

Yuu lowered the phone onto the table, letting it rest beside his untouched glass of water. For a moment, he simply stared at it—at the way its surface reflected the light, at the silence that settled in its wake.

He leaned back in his chair again, fingers threading through his hair.

“Every day,” he muttered, the words escaping on a quiet exhale, “why am I always butting in with these chara—”

He stopped.

His jaw clenched for a second, the words catching.

Then, more quietly this time, his voice almost flat:

“…Why am I always butting in with these people…”

The sentence hung there, incomplete in feeling, even though the words were whole.

[Minori Hanasato’s Perspective]

The moment the call with Yuu ended, Minori didn’t waste a second.

She tucked her phone back into her bag, smoothed out her skirt, and made her way down the hallway of their rehearsal space, the soles of her shoes clicking softly against the polished floor.

Her steps were brisk, her heart light with a sense of purpose, but also fluttering with nerves.

The manager’s office was tucked into the back, a quiet little space that always felt colder than the rest of the building.

When she opened the door, the faint scent of disinfectant met her nose, sharp and sterile, blending with the familiar undertone of fabric softener from costume storage nearby.

It was a smell she’d come to associate with hard work and long days.

Ayaka sat at her desk near the window, bathed in the pale afternoon light.

Her brows were furrowed, her tablet aglow with overlapping tabs, schedules, emails, coordination apps, and social media reports.

Her half-melted iced coffee sat to the side, condensation pooling beneath it like forgotten urgency.

“Ayaka-san?” Minori called gently.

Ayaka looked up, startled for a second, then softened. “Minori-chan? Do you need something for the next set?”

“Ah no, not about the performance,” Minori said, stepping inside with a sheepish smile. “I actually… wanted to suggest something.”

Ayaka set the stylus down and gave her a more focused look. “Go on.”

Minori took a deep breath, fingers fidgeting behind her back. “I know you’ve been working really hard lately. You always take care of everything—rehearsals, interviews, responding to fan letters, arranging transport, managing livestreams… It’s a lot. And it must be exhausting.”

“It’s part of the job,” Ayaka said, not unkindly—just matter-of-fact.

“I know,” Minori nodded. “But even the best managers need help sometimes.”

A quiet beat passed between them.

Ayaka’s gaze softened as she leaned back slightly in her chair.

“Help?”

Minori straightened up, her voice firmer now. “I’d like to recommend someone to be your assistant. Just part-time, if that’s okay. He’s reliable, quick to notice details, and he’s been helping out so many people already, without even realizing it.”

Ayaka raised an eyebrow. “He?”

“His name is Yuu Hazuki.”

The manager blinked once. Then chuckled. “Yuu Hazuki… is he the same fan who showed up to that handshake event without a single piece of merch on him?”

Minori laughed, flustered. “U-uh—technically, yes! But he’s not like that! He’s really observant, and always watching quietly from the sidelines. He never causes a scene, and somehow ends up helping people anyway. He just… understands what we do. More than most people.”

Ayaka folded her arms, watching her closely now. “…And you think this boy could handle working with a professional idol unit?”

Minori didn’t hesitate. “Yeah. I believe he can.”

The older woman tilted her head slightly, giving Minori a slow once-over. Her voice, when she spoke again, was teasing.

“You speak about Yuu Hazuki like you’re in a relationship.”

“E-eh?!” Minori flushed instantly. “N-no! It’s not like that!”

Ayaka gave a low, tired laugh and leaned back in her chair with a sigh. There was a smile forming at the edge of her lips—small, but genuine.

“You really believe in him, huh?”

Minori’s hands curled into small fists at her sides, her eyes shining with sincerity. “I do.”

Ayaka glanced down at her tablet again. Then let out another sigh—this one more thoughtful.

“Alright. I’ll meet him.”

Minori gasped, eyes wide. “Really?!”

“It’s just a meeting,” Ayaka reminded, voice cool but not cold. “But if he’s as competent as you say… We’ll see.”

“Thank you, Ayaka-san!” Minori bowed deeply, practically glowing with gratitude. She backed out of the room like a balloon about to float away.

As her footsteps faded down the hallway, Ayaka chuckled to herself, finally reaching for her neglected iced coffee.

The drink had gone watery, but she sipped it anyway.

“Yuu Hazuki, huh?” she murmured, tapping her stylus thoughtfully against her chin. “Let’s see what kind of person keeps showing up in everyone’s story.”

Chapter End Notes

Sorry if its short, I'll make up for it tomorrow!

Chapter 31: Supporting the Stars (Part 2)

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

[MORE MORE JUMP!'s Perspective]

The door to the rehearsal studio creaked open with a soft metallic groan, just loud enough to pull the attention of the three girls inside.

Minori slipped through the doorway, careful as she closed it behind her with a muted click.

The room still shimmered with the echoes of movement.

A faint beat from earlier practice clung to the walls like the scent of exertion, warm, electric, lingering.

Overhead lights reflected off the glossy floor, catching beads of sweat on flushed skin and glinting against polished mirrors.

Airi sat on the floor, one leg stretched out in front of her while the other bent lazily at the knee.

A towel drooped over her shoulders, and she took long gulps from her water bottle, her chest rising and falling in a tired rhythm.

Shizuku stood near the wall-length mirror, gently patting her cheeks with a soft embroidered handkerchief.

Haruka stood a little apart from the others, posture straight despite the fatigue in her eyes. Even her exhaustion was disciplined.

All three turned when Minori entered.

"You're back," Haruka said, her voice calm, reaching for her bottle but not lifting it to her lips. "You were gone longer than usual."

"Sorry!" Minori offered a sheepish smile. "I had to talk to Ayaka-san. Something important came up."

Shizuku blinked, curious. "Is everything alright?"

"Yup! Everything's okay." Minori walked across the floor and plopped down beside Airi, the cool wood catching her palms. "Actually, I wanted to tell you all something."

Airi gave her a look. "You've got that face. Like you're about to confess to something huge."

Minori laughed, light and genuine. "Not huge. Just… surprising, maybe."

All three waited.

"I asked Ayaka-san if she'd consider bringing in a part-time assistant manager."

Haruka blinked. “An assistant manager?”

“For her?” Airi echoed, brows furrowing. “Seriously?”

“She’s been juggling so much lately—scheduling, mail, bookings. It’s honestly too much for one person.”

Shizuku gently folded her handkerchief and tucked it into her pocket. “That’s true… I always see her eating lunch while answering emails.”

“So,” Haruka asked, crossing her arms, “who did you have in mind?”

Minori paused only a heartbeat before answering.

“Yuu-kun.”

There was a sharp stillness in the air—brief, but noticeable.

“…Hazuki-kun?” Airi said, eyes narrowing as if she hadn’t heard correctly. “You mean that guy?"

“Yeah!”

Airi sat up straighter, her brows pinched. “Wait. Hold on. Why him? And why didn’t you tell us first?”

Minori raised her hands quickly. “I wanted to! I just… needed to ask before I lost the courage. Ayaka-san said she’s willing to meet him.”

“But Minori,” Haruka said carefully, her voice even, “we don’t know him that well. We’ve only seen him a few times. What makes you so sure?”

Minori glanced down at her hands, fingers curling slightly in her lap.

“Because… he listens. He really sees people. And somehow, even without meaning to, he ends up helping them. He’s done it with Vivid BAD SQUAD after all!"

Shizuku looked thoughtful, lips pursed.

Airi still seemed skeptical, arms crossed tightly. “Tch… I guess. But if he messes up anything, I’m dragging him back to Ayaka-san myself.”

“I’m not saying he’s perfect, But I think we should give him a chance.”

Haruka didn’t speak right away. Her gaze drifted to the window, where late sunlight streamed in, gold on the floorboards. After a moment, she gave a small nod.

“If Ayaka-san’s willing to meet him… then we’ll wait and see.”

Minori’s expression softened with relief. “Thank you.”

Airi muttered under her breath, “Still think you should’ve told us first.”

Minori reached out and bumped her shoulder lightly. “Sorry. Next time, I will. Promise.”

Shizuku let out a quiet giggle, easing the tension.

Just as the tension in the room began to fade, Haruka finally spoke again, quiet, but firm.

"…But I want to be there during the interview with Ayaka-san."

Minori turned, blinking in surprise. "Eh? Haruka-chan?"

"I'm not against it, and if Ayaka-san is considering it, then I trust her judgment. But if this person is going to be working with us… I want to see for myself."

Airi raised an eyebrow, clearly caught off guard by the sudden assertiveness. "Whoa… didn't expect that."

Shizuku looked at Haruka with soft curiosity. "Is it because you're worried?"

Haruka's lips pressed into a thin line for a moment before she exhaled.

"…I just want to make sure he understands what it means to support an idol group. What it means to support us."

Her tone wasn't harsh—it was careful, grounded in something deeper.

Minori looked at her quietly, then nodded with a small smile. "Okay. I'll let Ayaka-san know."

Haruka gave a single, resolute nod. "Thank you."

Airi flopped back onto the floor with a groan. "Man, I feel like this is gonna be more intense than any of our actual auditions."

"Maybe, but I think Yuu-kun can handle it."

Shizuku giggled softly. "Let's make sure he survives it first."

As the light from the studio window stretched a little longer across the floor, the four girls settled into a brief, reflective silence.

Somehow… it already felt like things were beginning to shift.

[Yuu Hazuki's Perspective]

The next day arrived like most others, quiet, with the soft hum of life easing gently into motion.

Morning sunlight filtered through the blinds, casting pale slats across the floor in muted gold.

The air was warm already, humming faintly with the distant song of cicadas and the low rumble of a delivery truck somewhere down the street.

Yuu sat at the edge of his bed, a half-laced sock forgotten in his hand. He blinked slowly, his other foot already dressed and tapping lightly against the hardwood floor.

The silence was peaceful.

Ordinary.

A small window of stillness before the rhythms of the day truly began.

Then his phone buzzed.

A short, clipped vibration from the desk.

He turned, expecting the usual morning ping—a login reminder from the rhythm game or some idle promotion notification.

But what greeted him was different.

[Unknown Number]

The screen glowed with a single message, neatly typed:

Good morning. This is Saitou Ayaka, manager of MORE MORE JUMP!. Minori Hanasato passed along your name regarding the part-time assistant manager position. I'd like to speak with you briefly, if you're available today. Please reply with a time that works for you.

- Ayaka

Yuu stared.

The sock slid from his fingers.

For a second, he simply… processed.

The name Saitou Ayaka stood out like bold text in his mind.

Not because she was famous or known beyond idol circles, but because she was real. Tangible. A functioning adult in this fabricated, shifting world. A figure behind the curtain.

And she wanted to talk to him.

He sat a little straighter, the atmosphere in his bedroom subtly shifting.

The air felt heavier now, not unpleasant, but weighted, like the moment before stepping onto a stage.

Slowly, he reached for his phone.

His thumb hovered above the screen for a second longer than necessary before he began to type.

Yuu stared at the message a moment longer, his eyes scanning the words again as if they might change under closer inspection.

Minori actually went through with it...

Part of him wanted to pretend this wasn't a big deal.

That this was just another odd detour in a life that had long since stopped making logical sense.

But this was different.

This wasn’t a conversation inside a SEKAI, or a chance meeting with a character guided by emotion.

This was a real person, asking for his time.

So don’t be careless about it.

He sat up fully now, brushing his fingers through his hair as he gathered his thoughts. The screen still waited patiently in his hand, cursor blinking at the end of Ayaka’s neatly worded message.

After a pause, he began to type—carefully, deliberately:

Good morning, Saitou-san.
Thank you for reaching out. I’d be happy to speak with you. Would the afternoon be alright? I’m available after 3:00 PM.

Best regards,
Hazuki Yuu

He read the message three times, checking for tone, punctuation, anything that might make him sound unprofessional or too casual.

Once satisfied, he hit send.

The soft whoosh of the message being delivered echoed quietly in the room.

Then, silence.

Yuu leaned back, eyes fixed on the screen as if the response might come instantly.

Part-time assistant manager for an idol group... huh.

He rested his head against the back of his chair and let his eyes close for a moment.

Yuu sighed, dragging a hand through his sleep-tousled hair.

"Alright..." he muttered to himself, stretching his arms with a quiet groan. "Time to at least make myself look decent later."

He glanced toward the mirror near his desk, his reflection half-shrouded by sunlight, and frowned at the vague mess of bed hair, uneven collar, and the sluggish expression still lingering on his face.

"...Yeah, I need food first."

He stood, rubbing the back of his neck as he headed toward the door.

His stomach grumbled faintly.

And just as he reached for the handle, a thought flickered through his mind—

A different world.

The time before all this.

[Flashback]

The rush of people.

The white noise of the city.

Concrete underfoot and a convenience store breakfast half-eaten in his lap as he sat on the stone bench outside campus.

Back then, the days moved in fast-forward, lecture halls, late-night group chats, and job-hunting anxiety.

Familiar ones.

“Hazuki-kun,” came the voice of his friend, precise and crisp, tugging at the collar of a white shirt that looked ironed within an inch of its life, “if you’re gonna walk into an interview looking like that, you might as well wear a sign that says, ‘Please reject me politely.’”

Yuu had blinked mid-chew, the onigiri puffing out his cheek like a squirrel’s. “…What’s wrong with how I look?”

“Your hair’s doing that weird bird-wing thing again,” they replied, deadpan. “Your shirt’s half-tucked, your tie’s barely a knot, and you’ve got bags under your eyes like you’re storing groceries.”

A smirk followed, along with a gentle nudge to his shoulder.

“Come on, man. At least pretend you want the job.”

He’d laughed because it was true.

And later, after finishing his breakfast, he’d tugged his collar straight.

“…Also,” the friend had added, leaning in with mock exasperation, “wipe that rice grain off your lip before you go in.”

Without waiting, they reached over and brushed it away with a knuckle, muttering something under their breath about hopeless boys with decent hearts.

Yuu had only rolled his eyes and finished the onigiri.

[Back to present]

Yuu blinked.

The memory dissolved like breath on glass, but its warmth lingered in his chest, just a little.

“…I guess I’ve always been like this, huh?” he murmured to himself, hand still resting on the doorknob.

Then he pushed it open and stepped out into the hallway, the scent of breakfast from downstairs guiding him forward.

Another day, another thread pulled tight in a world slowly tying him to something new.

The house was quiet in the way homes usually are on lazy weekdays, distant sounds of cicadas humming through the cracked kitchen window, and the faint clatter of dishes as Yuu reheated leftover rice and eggs.

He ate without much ceremony, seated at the kitchen table, watching sunlight shift across the floor in slow arcs.

The hum of the microwave.

The clink of chopsticks.

Everything felt suspended, like time was biding its breath.

After breakfast, he washed his plate, wiped the counter, and stood idle in the hallway for a few moments before sighing and returning to his room.

He tried passing the time the usual way.

Three rhythm stages.

One after another, without pause.

The songs pulsed through his fingertips and wrists, complex patterns crashing like waves.

Bright colors.

Scoring ticks.

That strange, euphoric heartbeat that thudded against his chest as if borrowed from someone else.

Perfect Full Combo.

Stage Cleared.

But once the music faded, the silence returned, uninvited and weighty.

He stretched.

Tidied up.

Changed into clean clothes.

By noon, the sunlight had brightened into something near-blinding, heating the windows as cicadas screamed outside. Yuu lay on his bed for a while, staring up at the ceiling, eyes half-lidded, thinking of everything and nothing.

Eventually, he rose and headed out.

He wandered into the neighborhood through tree-lined sidewalks and past corner stores with little paper fans in the window.

A short stop by the convenience store yielded a cold tea and a melon pan.

He sat on a bench near the park, sipping quietly, watching a few kids playing ball across the field.

One of them tripped and immediately laughed, brushing dirt off his knees.

The others helped him up without saying anything.

Yuu smiled faintly at that.

Somehow, it reminded him of the girls in MORE MORE JUMP!, how they kept picking each other up after every fall.

Time ticked forward.

He didn't really do much.

Just walked, watched, thought.

And then, finally—

3:00 PM.

The air was softer by then, the light taking on a golden hue as the afternoon settled.

Yuu checked the message thread again, just to be sure. The address was correct, the time unchanged.

He stood in front of the small, modern office building tucked between a bakery and a karaoke bar—a plain white sign above the glass door that simply read:
"MMJ Production – 2nd Floor."

He inhaled once through his nose. Slowly.

Then climbed the stairs, each step echoing faintly behind him.

At the top, he paused before the frosted glass door, fingers flexing at his side.

This was… a little surreal.

Was he really about to walk in and talk business with idols and a professional manager?

"Just a meeting, Nothing official. Yet."

Still, his hand hesitated at the door handle.

Then he pushed it open.

The door gave a soft click as it opened, and Yuu stepped inside.

He expected a sterile office space. Maybe a cluttered desk, the tap of a stylus, and a sharp but polite introduction.

What he didn't expect—what made him stop halfway through the doorway—was the presence of someone else.

Standing beside Ayaka's desk, arms folded neatly and gaze fixed forward with quiet intensity, was Kiritani Haruka.

Focused.

Yuu blinked. His posture instinctively straightened.

Haruka?

Ayaka glanced up from the screen of her tablet and offered a calm, professional smile. "Hazuki-kun. Thank you for coming."

It made something tight coil in Yuu's chest. He'd seen this kind of gaze before—backstage, in rehearsals, in the fleeting glances she gave herself in the mirror.

She was guarding something.

He swallowed, shutting the door behind him. "I didn't realize this was going to be… an interview."

Ayaka chuckled softly. "It's not. Think of it as a conversation. Haruka-chan asked to be here."

That made Yuu pause.

"…She did?"

Haruka nodded once. "If you're going to be assisting with our unit, I want to be sure you're capable."

Her voice was smooth, but her words were blunt. She wasn't being rude—just precise.

Yuu nodded slowly, letting the tension roll off his shoulders as he stepped further into the room. "Fair enough."

Ayaka gestured toward a chair across from the desk. "Please, have a seat."

He did, the cushion cool against his back.

The small office was lit with soft natural light filtering through a frosted window, the faint hum of an air conditioner padding the silence.

Haruka remained standing beside Ayaka, arms still crossed, as if refusing to let herself relax.

Yuu met her gaze calmly.

"I'm not here to waste anyone's time, I'm not saying I know how to manage idols. But I've watched this unit more than anyone realizes. I've seen how you all move—not just on stage, but off. How you look at each other. How much pressure you put on yourselves."

His voice was steady, but quiet.

"I don't want to get in the way. I just want to help."

Haruka's eyes flickered. For a brief second, Yuu thought he saw something soften.

Ayaka leaned back, folding her hands. “Well, let’s talk, then."

Yuu inhaled slowly.

Then let the breath slip from his lips in one silent, measured stream.

The moment his eyes opened, something in him shifted.

It wasn’t visible—no dramatic spark or theatrical flare—but the stillness in the room bent just slightly around him, like a stage recognizing its lead.

His back straightened.

His expression eased, not blank, but calm.

Controlled.

Every small muscle relaxed with purpose, every blink was timed with care.

[Genius of Acting] — activated.

Even Haruka noticed it.

Her shoulders tensed, not out of suspicion, but surprise.

Her gaze sharpened, as if sensing something intangible shift in the air.

This was someone composed.

Precise.

Professional.

“Before we begin,” Yuu said, voice calm but steady, “I just want to say—thank you for giving me this chance. I know it’s not easy to trust someone outside the unit.”

He turned his gaze directly to Haruka.

Haruka’s lips parted slightly, caught off guard by how clear his words were.

How… genuine.

Ayaka raised an eyebrow, a soft hum of interest escaping her lips. “Well. That’s quite the entrance.”

Yuu smiled faintly, just enough to seem approachable, not smug.

Ayaka tapped her stylus lightly against the tablet, eyes narrowing in amused thought. “Let’s start with something simple, Hazuki-kun.”

Yuu nodded once, his hands folded neatly on his lap.

“What exactly do you think an assistant manager does?”

Yuu didn’t answer right away. Instead, he glanced toward the floor for a moment, as if sifting through mental notes.

Then he met Ayaka’s gaze evenly. “I think an assistant manager exists to fill in the gaps—to handle the invisible tasks no one else sees. Things that seem small, but make a big difference.”

He tilted his head slightly. “You’re juggling emails, interviews, rehearsal scheduling, costume requests, social media correspondence, fan club updates, venue coordination, and talent agency communication… I could keep going.”

Ayaka blinked, taken aback—not by the accuracy, but by the tone.

He wasn’t showing off.

Haruka, still standing, narrowed her eyes slightly. “And you think you can handle that?”

Yuu turned to her now.

“Not all of it. Not at once. But I can take some of the weight off. Carry the small things so you don’t have to trip over them later.”

Her arms tightened. “Why would you even want to?”

“Because I’ve seen how hard you push yourself. All of you. I might not be part of your unit, but I am someone who cares.”

Haruka’s eyes flickered, not softening, not yet, but something unreadable passed through her expression.

Ayaka leaned forward slightly, propping her chin on her knuckles. “Do you have any experience handling schedules or group logistics?”

"Yes, I learned to carry a lot of pens.”

Haruka finally moved, stepping forward slightly, eyes fixed on him.

“Do you know what being around us actually means?”

The question landed heavy in the air.

Yuu didn’t flinch.

“It means being around four people constantly striving to improve, despite their own doubts. Four girls trying to shine in front of the world even on days when it feels impossible. It means seeing them tired, vulnerable, frustrated—and never turning that into gossip.”

A pause.

“It means knowing when to speak… and when to step back.”

Haruka stared at him for a long moment.

Then, slowly, her arms loosened. Not dropped entirely—but a degree less guarded.

“…You really did watch us,” she murmured.

Yuu gave a quiet nod. “More than I realized.”

Ayaka smiled again, closing her tablet gently. “I think that’s enough questions for now.”

Haruka glanced at her, but didn’t object.

“We’ll consider this your first step, I’ll talk to the others and set a trial period. If they agree, you’ll shadow me for the next few sessions—quietly.”

“I understand."

“And, don’t disappoint me.”

“I won’t.”

“You can leave now. Please make sure to come here again tomorrow.” Ayaka said as she reached for her tablet.

“Oh… uh, I know this is sudden, but… I’m still a student.”

Ayaka looked up, a flicker of realization crossing her face. “Ah. Of course. Don’t worry, I’ll adjust your schedule around your classes. You won’t miss anything important.”

Relief softened Yuu’s shoulders. “Thank god…” he muttered, bowing politely before heading for the door. “Thank you again for your time.”

As the door clicked softly shut behind him, a gentle quiet settled into the room.

[Ayaka and Haruka's Perspective]

Then, slowly, Haruka exhaled—her tension unwinding like a ribbon from her chest.

“…For some reason,” she murmured, arms folding loosely, “he really reminds me of you, Ayaka-san.”

Ayaka looked up from her tablet, one brow arching curiously.

Haruka offered a rare, soft smile—one touched with something close to nostalgia. “Polite. Watchful. Reserved, but reliable. You used to carry that same energy when you first joined us.”

“Did I?” Ayaka chuckled, brushing a lock of hair behind her ear. “Well, that boy’s still got some growing to do… but I can see it.”

She paused, tapping the edge of the tablet thoughtfully.

“Think he’ll ever show his fanboy side once he opens up?”

Haruka smirked. “Probably. Once he relaxes, I wouldn’t be surprised if he starts asking for autographs.”

Ayaka leaned back in her chair with a small laugh. “I mean, hey—I’m still a fangirl myself.”

“Oh?” Haruka’s tone teased, light and dry. “Let me guess… still obsessed with—?”

“Shizuku-sama,” Ayaka declared dramatically, placing both hands over her chest as if reciting a vow. “Every time she ties her hair up before a rehearsal, I lose ten years of emotional maturity.”

Haruka shook her head with a quiet chuckle, the edge in her posture easing away.

And for a moment, the room—once heavy with expectation—was filled with nothing but warmth.

Friendly. Familiar.

A place where two professionals could laugh quietly between responsibilities, and where, perhaps, one more person would soon belong.

[Back to Yuu’s Perspective]

The hallway outside the manager’s office was quiet—too quiet.

The polished floors reflected the overhead lights in a soft glow, and each step Yuu took echoed faintly against the walls, too loud for a place that wasn’t meant to feel like a stage.

And yet…

It did.

His heart was pounding against his ribs like it wanted out. Each beat rang like a drumroll, building toward something uncertain.

He kept walking.

Steady. Calm.

Or at least, he tried to be.

[Warning: Genius of Acting is wavering. Automatic deactivation imminent.]

The quiet message pulsed at the edge of his mind—his inner monologue cracking.

“...Hahh…”

Yuu slowed, pressing a hand to his chest. His palm was damp with nervous sweat.

Breathe.

He inhaled deeply, holding the air in his lungs like armor. Then let it go.

Again.

Inhale.

Exhale.

Inhale.

Exhale.

Each breath steadied him.

Slightly.

He wasn't sure why he was reacting like this.

"…Get a grip," he muttered under his breath.

"I hope there are skills that'll actually help me in this job," Yuu muttered under his breath, slipping his hands into his pockets as he began the walk home.

He walked without rushing, letting his thoughts wander.

What exactly were the qualifications for being an assistant manager to a rising idol group?

He knew how to listen.

He knew how to read the room.

He knew how to keep a secret.

And, lately… he knew how to feel the heartbeat of a Stage SEKAI.

But none of those came with a certification, and certainly not with a training manual.

Yuu tilted his head back, watching as a pair of swallows darted across the sky.

"…Maybe I'll figure it out myself."

Chapter End Notes

Fact about Yuu Hazuki #1:
Yuu possesses a unique status interface, resembling something out of Solo Leveling or Sword Art Online. Unlike the standard PROJECT SEKAI game UI, his version is custom-built by [????]

Through this interface, Yuu can interact with features such as:
— [Gacha]
— [Events]
— [Convert]
— [Skill Tree]
— [Skill List]
— [Song Stages]

This system is not visible to anyone else, only to Yuu. He doesn't know why he has it, but the world seems to know him.

It isn’t just a visual overlay; it’s part of the world now… and perhaps, something that shouldn’t exist.

Chapter 32: Supporting the Stars (Part 3)

Chapter Notes

I'm sorry that I'm neglecting as a writer, but right now I have tons of responsibility.

(I'm training my umamusume while trailblazing while proxying around while being a good shikikan)

See the end of the chapter for more notes

The morning passed like a quiet prelude, but Yuu Hazuki's mind was anything but still.

"Hazuki-kun, MEIKO-san is calling us over to the Street SEKAI... Are you coming?" Toya asked, his voice calm as always.

The hallway of Kamiyama High buzzed softly around them with the echo of students shuffling between classes.

Light from the high windows pooled against the floor in warm ribbons, but to Yuu, everything felt like static behind his rushing thoughts.

Sorry, I'm… kind of busy right now."

Toya blinked, then offered a polite nod, no judgment in his eyes.

"I see. I'll let the others know."

Yuu offered him a fleeting smile, already swinging his bag over one shoulder. "Yeah. Thanks, Aoyagi-kun."

Toya watched him for a beat longer, then turned and walked off, leaving Yuu alone in the corridor.

Yuu adjusted the strap on his bag, inhaling deeply.

Today was it his first official day as MORE MORE JUMP!'s part-time assistant manager.

And while the title sounded simple enough…

He had no idea what he was actually supposed to do.

The MORE MORE JUMP! building stood nestled in a quiet part of the entertainment district, modest on the outside but polished within.

He tightened his grip on the strap of his bag, heart thudding with a mixture of anticipation and nerves.

By the time he reached the entrance, the large studio windows gleamed in the sunlight. The glass doors slid open with a mechanical sigh, ushering him into the cool interior where polished floors

reflected the overhead lights and faint music drifted from deeper inside.

He passed a few staff members on the way in, people he didn't know, not yet, but they offered polite nods, and he returned each one with a small bow.

The front desk greeted him with a chirp from the receptionist, who recognized him immediately.

"Ah, Hazuki-kun! Ayaka-san said you'd be starting today. She's in the studio right now."

"Thank you," he said, bowing lightly before continuing down the corridor.

Yuu approached the studio.

The door was already slightly ajar, and through the narrow gap, he could hear the gentle hum of activity—shoes brushing against the floor, the soft thump of music fading out, and the murmur of familiar voices.

He paused just before the entrance.

A quick breath in.

Hold.

Out.

Then, with a calmness that didn't quite reach his chest, he pushed the door open and stepped inside.

The room was bright and wide, sunlight flooding through high windows and pooling across the gleaming hardwood floor.

Large mirrors lined the far wall, catching the reflections of the girls inside as they moved between stretches and water breaks.

Airi stood near the speakers, adjusting the volume knob. Shizuku was crouched by her bag, adjusting the ribbon on her wrist with careful fingers. Haruka stood nearest the mirror, towel around her neck, gaze focused and silent.

And in the middle of it all, Minori.

She turned the moment she heard the door creak open, eyes lighting up instantly.

"Yuu-kun!" she called, waving him over with an excited smile.

The other girls turned as well—some surprised, some curious.

Airi raised an eyebrow. "So you really did drag him here."

Minori puffed her cheeks. "I didn't drag him! He came on his own."

Shizuku smiled softly and gave a small wave. "Good afternoon, Hazuki-kun."

Yuu gave a polite bow as he stepped in. "Good afternoon. I'll be assisting from today… I'll try not to get in the way."

Haruka tilted her head slightly, arms crossed.

Her expression was hard to read.

"…We'll see how you do," she said, not unkindly. "Let's just start with watching."

Yuu nodded.

He knew he had a lot to prove, not just to Ayaka, not just to the girls, but to himself.

Still… as the door clicked shut behind him and the music resumed, he felt the weight of the moment settle across his shoulders.

Yuu stepped quietly across the studio floor, his footsteps muffled against the polished wood.

He made his way toward the far corner of the room where Ayaka stood beside a collapsible table, her tablet in one hand and a pen clipped behind her ear.

"Good afternoon."

Ayaka didn't look up immediately, still scanning the screen in her hand. "Yeah, you're quite early," she said, tapping something into a form before finally glancing up at him.

er eyes softened just a touch. "Good. Shows you're taking this seriously."

"Thank you…" Yuu murmured, adjusting his bag strap. He turned his gaze to the studio space beyond, where the four girls of MORE MORE JUMP! were finishing up their pre-rehearsal stretches, chatting quietly among themselves.

They looked… different when seen like this.

No stage lights.

No filters.

Just four girls preparing to push their bodies to the edge in order to perform something they loved.

"…So, uh…" Yuu scratched the back of his head, trying to keep his voice steady. "What should I do?"

Ayaka looked at him for a beat longer, then slid her tablet onto the table with a soft click.

"For now, just observe," she said, arms folding loosely over her chest. "Keep an eye on timing, if they're following choreography cues correctly, and let me know if any of them look too fatigued to continue. Especially Haruka."

"Haruka?"

"She's been overexerting lately, She won't say anything out loud, but watch her pacing. If she starts cutting her breaks short, tell me immediately."

"Got it."

Ayaka gave a short nod. “Also, if someone drops something, you pick it up. If water bottles are missing, go grab extras. If one of them forgets their towel, get an extra one.. You’re here to support, not to lead.”

Yuu nodded more firmly this time, his posture straightening just slightly.

“Understood.”

Ayaka glanced sideways, a corner of her mouth curling up ever so faintly. “Good. Then let’s see if you’ve got the eyes of a proper assistant.”

And just as the music kicked back in—upbeat, bright, laced with layers of vocals, the girls took their positions.

Yuu stood quietly beside the table, already watching.

Already learning.

The soft shuffle of sneakers against the studio floor echoed beneath the upbeat rhythm playing through the overhead speakers.

One by one, the girls of MORE MORE JUMP! moved in sync with the choreography, their forms sharp and fluid beneath the glow of the ceiling lights.

Their instructor stood at the front of the room, calling out cues with precise clarity.

Her movements were crisp, professional, and relentless as she demonstrated each step.

The girls mirrored her with focus.

Yuu stood near the back, arms loosely crossed, his eyes scanning the room like Ayaka had instructed.

He was paying close attention.

Not just to their form, but to the small details, the quick glances exchanged between the girls, the way Haruka’s hand hovered near her side for a second too long, or how Minori’s breathing quickened with every repeat.

Still, amid all that careful observation, something strange began to stir within him.

He slipped a hand into his pocket and pulled out his phone, clicking the screen.

4:50 PM.

Rehearsal had been going for nearly an hour, but his heartbeat felt as if it had only just begun to race.

Ba-dump.

He watched as the girls leaped into the next formation, ponytails swaying, fingers slicing the air with practiced elegance.

Ba-dump.

It wasn't adrenaline.

Not exactly.

Not anxiety either.

There was just something about the way they moved.

The effort in every breath.

The unspoken harmony between them.

They weren't idols on a distant screen or characters behind glass anymore.

They were right in front of him.

Real.

Flawed.

Human.

And yet—brilliant.

His heart kept beating harder the longer he watched, unsure of what exactly he was feeling.

Admiration?

Nervousness?

Awe?

Yuu didn't know.

He only knew that every time he saw them dance like that, especially Haruka, who was fighting so hard to maintain perfection, it felt like something within him was being pulled forward.

Like some part of him wanted to reach out, just to understand why.

At exactly 5 PM, the sharp clap of hands cut clean through the studio's rhythm.

The music halted mid-beat, echoing briefly before fading into silence.

"Break time," the choreographer called, her voice firm but not unkind.

The girls exhaled in near unison, their bodies releasing the tension they'd been holding onto like a taut string finally allowed to relax.

Airi dropped to the floor with a dramatic groan, tossing her towel over her head. Minori stumbled over to the wall, clutching her water bottle like it was her last lifeline.

Shizuku, ever composed, walked over to a nearby bench and began fixing her ribbon once more.

Haruka remained standing a few moments longer, her breathing even but her eyes sharp, watching the others before finally allowing herself to sit.

Yuu looked up from his spot near the corner.

He hadn't realized how long he'd been standing still, how tightly his fingers had been curled around his phone.

The stillness in the room was different now.

Not empty, but earned.

Filled with quiet huffs of breath, the shuffle of towels, the hum of the AC overhead.

He stepped forward a little, uncertain if he should approach or just observe.

Then again, that was part of his job now, wasn't it?

To see what others didn't.

To support from the sidelines.

Even if his heart was still trying to make sense of its own rhythm.

Minori tilted her head, her ponytail swaying slightly as she offered a small, curious smile. "You spaced out there for a second."

Yuu blinked again, grounding himself in the present. The sound of breathing, the rustle of uniforms, the scent of sweat and citrusy fabric spray from the girls' towels—it all settled back in.

"Oh, right. Sorry. I was just… thinking."

"Thinking about what? You looked so serious."

Yuu glanced toward the others—Haruka still sipping water in the corner, Airi bantering half-heartedly with Shizuku on the bench—and then looked back at Minori.

"They're really something, all of you."

Minori blinked. Then her cheeks warmed slightly, and she gave him a small but bright smile.

"You really think so?"

Yuu nodded.

"It's not just about the dancing. It's the way you move together. Like… every step is backed by something more. Something I can't put into words yet."

"That's the nicest thing anyone's said all day!"

"Well, I guess I'm earning my title, then. Assistant manager, right?"

"More like… emotional support manager!"

Yuu stood quietly by the wall, his gaze lingering on the subtle motions across the dance floor—tired shoulders relaxing, towels dabbing sweat, soft chatter returning as the room exhaled from the intensity of practice.

He didn't even notice her approach until a voice broke through his thoughts, light and curious.

"So? How was it?"

Yuu blinked.

"Huh?"

Minori stood just a few steps away, smiling up at him with that ever-bright warmth of hers.

"You spaced out there for a second," she said.

He paused. Then nodded, as if remembering where he was.

The ambient sounds returned, the whir of the AC, the distant click of a water bottle cap, the faint scent of citrus from the fabric spray they used on their towels. He grounded himself with a breath.

"Oh. Right. Sorry. I was just… thinking."

Minori leaned forward slightly, her fingers laced behind her back, eyes sparkling. "Thinking about what? You looked so serious."

Yuu cast a glance across the room. Airi was laughing at something Shizuku said, waving her towel like a flag. Haruka remained in the corner, drinking water with quiet dignity, her gaze sharp even during the break. And then, slowly, he looked back at Minori.

"They're really something. All of you."

She blinked. Then blinked again. Her cheeks turned a soft pink, and the corners of her lips curved into a bashful smile. "You really think so?"

He nodded.

"It's not just about the dancing, it's the way you move together. Like… every step has meaning. Like you're carrying something with you. I can't really put it into words yet. But it's there."

Minori's eyes widened just slightly before she gave a breathy laugh and placed both hands to her cheeks, trying to hide the growing blush.

"That's the nicest thing anyone's said all day!"

"Well, I guess I'm earning my title then. Assistant manager, right?"

"More like… emotional support manager."

"I'll add it to the résumé."

Minori stepped a little closer, looking down at her shoes. Her voice softened. "I'm really glad you're here, Yuu-kun. You notice things that… even I sometimes miss."

Yuu didn’t reply right away. But his smile said enough.

The sharp clap of the choreographer’s hands sliced clean through the moment, echoing crisply across the mirrored walls of the studio.

“Alright, break’s over, everyone!” she called, her voice brisk but encouraging. “Back to positions!”

The girls stirred instantly, years of habit kicking in like muscle memory.

Yuu stepped aside, watching them regroup as the choreographer began counting down.

The air shifted again—lighter moments folded into disciplined focus, chatter replaced by stillness and syncopated footfalls.

And just like that, the music returned.

And then just like that... they practiced... and practiced... until the rehearsal studio had finally gone quiet.

Hours had passed since the last music track faded into silence, leaving only the soft hum of the ceiling lights and the echo of footsteps that had long stopped.

The air was heavy with the scent of effort, floor cleaner, dried sweat, the faint citrus tang of fabric spray still lingering in the corners.

The mirrors now reflected only emptiness, dim light, and the ghost of motion.

Yuu stood alone at the center of it all, clipboard in one hand, his jacket draped over the other.

A long sigh slipped from his lips as he checked the last few items Ayaka had logged.

Spare towels returned.

Stage props stored.

Audio systems are powered down.

He rubbed his eyes, feeling the fatigue settle deep into his shoulders.

“Being an assistant manager sure is tough," he muttered under his breath as he made his way toward the vending machine at the far end of the hallway.

Just as he slid a coin into the slot, a quiet voice answered him.

“It sure is…”

He flinched, startled by the sudden reply.

Turning, his eyes widened slightly.

Standing a few steps away, framed by the cool glow of the hallway lights, was Haruka Kiritani.

Standing a few steps away, framed by the cool glow of the hallway lights, was Haruka Kiritani.

She hadn’t changed out of her practice outfit; her sleeveless top clung slightly to her frame, a towel draped neatly around her neck.

Her dark blue hair, still damp with sweat, framed her face in loose strands that stuck to her cheek.

But even so, she stood with the same immaculate posture she always carried.

“Kirita—uh, Haruka-san? Why are you still here?”

She calmly inserted coins into the vending machine, eyes never straying from the panel.

“I was reviewing the footage. There was a misstep during the bridge in our second run-through. I couldn’t leave without understanding why.”

The machine clunked, and a cold bottle of barley tea dropped into the tray.

She reached down and picked it up, pressing the cool plastic against her cheek with a practiced flick of her wrist.

“Right… of course you do.”

Haruka turned her gaze to him. Her expression remained neutral, but not cold.

“And you? Still here this late?”

“Just making sure everything was logged properly, Clean-up, reports, Ayaka-san’s notes. I figured I’d do a final pass before heading home.”

Haruka nodded slowly, then unscrewed the cap and took a sip of her tea. She exhaled softly afterward, just barely a sign of weariness.

“You’re taking this seriously. That’s good.”

Yuu gave a soft laugh, letting his shoulders drop a bit.

“Thanks. I think I’m still winging it half the time.”

“You’re doing well,” she said, glancing at him. “Minori was right about you.”

The words caught him off guard.

“Huh?”

Haruka didn’t elaborate immediately.

“You might not see it yet, but you’re already part of this team.”

For a moment, Yuu didn’t know what to say. Then he gave a small, lopsided smile.

“Hmm… I guess I am, huh?”

He stood straighter, mirroring her posture slightly as he tapped the clipboard against his thigh.

“Well then, as part of this team—Haruka Kiritani—I order you to head home and get some rest. As assistant manager, it’s also my job to make sure you girls aren’t overdoing it.”

That earned the faintest flicker of amusement across Haruka’s face.

It wasn’t a laugh. But it was close. A small breath of something softer.

She turned back toward him and gave a single, elegant nod.

“…Understood, Hazuki-kun.”

"Then, as my assistant manager..." Haruka began, her voice light yet deliberate as she faced him with an unreadable glint in her eyes. "Will you escort me back to my home?"

Yuu blinked, caught completely off guard by the request.

His brows lifted slightly as his brain tried to process the casual weight of her tone.

“I mean… I can,” he said slowly, scratching the back of his head. “But I’d really rather avoid causing a scandal.”

Haruka smiled faintly, as if she had been expecting that answer.

“Don’t worry. I’ll go change first. Do you mind waiting?”

Yuu gave a small nod.

Without another word, Haruka turned and disappeared into the changing room, her towel still draped around her shoulders like a mantle.

The soft click of the door echoed down the quiet hallway, leaving Yuu alone once again beside the humming vending machine.

He exhaled, slumping just a bit, the clipboard still clutched loosely in one hand.

The night had been long. His head was buzzing from the constant back-and-forth, the reports, the faces, the pressure of trying not to mess up.

But for some reason… it was this part, the small, unexpected conversations, that left him the most disoriented.

A few minutes passed.

Then the door creaked open again.

Haruka stepped out in casual attire, her idol uniform gone.

She wore a loose hoodie in soft gray, her hair now tied.

Round glasses sat on the bridge of her nose, and her usual composure was softened by the simple disguise.

She could have passed for any other high school girl walking home after cram school, calm, low-profile, unbothered.

“Are those real glasses?”

Haruka shook her head once.

“I see. So it’s a disguise… That’s actually pretty clever.”

“Idols can’t avoid attracting attention in public,” she said, adjusting the strap of her bag. “It’s better to blend in.”

“That’s true…”

She glanced at him then, a teasing edge curling into her smile.

“And with this look,” she added, gesturing loosely at her outfit, “everyone will just think I’m a plain girl walking with a plain teen boy.”

Yuu gave a slow shrug, but before he could respond, she continued, with a sparkle of amusement in her voice.

“Now that I think about it… Maybe we could act like a couple?”

Ba-dump.

His heart leapt into his throat.

Yuu’s eyes widened, and his face flushed with the suddenness of it. He looked away quickly, one hand rising to cover his mouth in a half-hearted attempt to hide it.

“P-Please don’t joke like that, you’re making my heart race.”

Haruka’s chuckle was soft but unmistakably amused.

“Oh? Really?” she mused, her tone playful. “Fufu…”

She slung her bag over her shoulder with practiced grace and began walking down the hallway.

Her steps were light, almost effortless, and just before she turned the corner, she glanced back over her shoulder with a casual smile.

“Come on, assistant manager, you need to escort me, don’t you?”

Yuu stared for a moment, then sighed in resignation, lips twitching into a reluctant smile.

“Alright, alright,”

Chapter End Notes

Fact about Yuu Hazuki #2

Before finding himself in the strange, ever-shifting world of Project SEKAI, Yuu Hazuki lived a quiet but demanding life as a third-year college student. Majoring in Bachelor of Science in Biology, he was already in his second semester, an ordinary 20-year-old with crammed lecture notes, sleepless study nights, and convenience store breakfasts.

But here, inside this fabricated reality, time and age don't align. His appearance, his records, his school uniform… all mark him as a seventeen-year-old student, the same age as Aoyagi Toya. The world has rewritten him to fit the story.

Only Yuu remembers the truth.

And for now, he plays along.

Chapter 33: When No One's Watching

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

The night air greeted them as they stepped out of the agency building, cool and quiet beneath the soft glow of the streetlamps.

The city's hum had faded into a distant murmur, replaced by the rhythmic tap of footsteps against the sidewalk.

Haruka walked just slightly ahead, her hoodie pulled loosely over her hair, her hands tucked into her pockets. The faint scent of shampoo still clung to her, softened by the evening breeze.

Yuu followed at her side, his bag slung lazily over one shoulder, eyes flicking between the street ahead and the girl beside him.

For a while, neither spoke.

The world around them was still, traffic sparse, shops closing, the occasional buzz of a vending machine or a passing cyclist filling in the silence.

It was… peaceful.

Simple.

And yet, there was something weighty in the quiet between them.

Yuu glanced at Haruka again.

She hadn't said much since they left.

But there was a slight tension in her posture, a tightness in her shoulders that hadn't been there earlier.

He knew that look.

He'd seen it in mirrors before.

He kept walking, waiting for her to speak first.

And slowly, she did.

Yuu cleared his throat, the sound barely louder than the soft crunch of their shoes on the pavement.

"So… you go to Miyamasuzaka, right?"

Haruka turned her head slightly, surprised by the sudden question. "Mm. Yeah, I do."

"What's it like? I've only ever seen the outside. It feels... strict. Fancy. Like I'm not supposed to breathe near the front gate without permission."

A soft laugh escaped Haruka's lips.

"It's not that dramatic. Though… I guess it can feel like that sometimes. The teachers are really serious, and the students… well, most of them are."

"Most?"

"There are exceptions, I'm sure you'd be one of them."

Yuu gave a mock scoff. "What's that supposed to mean?"

"Just a feeling."

He grinned, the tension in his shoulders easing.

"Kamiyama High isn't all that different, honestly. But the expectations at your school feel… heavier."

Haruka didn't respond immediately.

Her steps slowed just a little, enough for her pace to match his exactly.

Then, almost as an afterthought, she said, "It's not the school that makes it heavy. Sometimes I think… It's just me."

Yuu turned his head slightly, watching her from the corner of his eye.

She wasn't smiling anymore.

"I know the others don't say it out loud, but I can tell they get worried when I'm too serious. Too… strict."

"You're the most experienced. It's not strange you'd take it seriously."

"Still. Sometimes I wonder if I'm dragging them down."

The breeze passed between them, cooler now.

Yuu exhaled slowly, eyes fixed ahead.

"…You're not."

Haruka looked at him, eyebrows lifted slightly.

"You're not dragging anyone down, for anything, you're holding the line so everyone else can keep up. Even if they don't say it, they're probably relying on that."

Haruka didn't answer at first.

Then she smiled—faint, but touched with something vulnerable.

"…You really say things like that so easily, huh?"

"Only when I mean them," Yuu replied, looking away to hide the warmth rising to his cheeks.

Haruka's voice broke the silence, gentle but edged with something quieter beneath.

"Say, Hazuki-kun… I have a story to tell you. Do you mind listening to me?"

Yuu turned to glance at her.

The way she asked.

Not casually, not playfully... It's different.

More like a request than a question.

He gave a small nod, his voice low. "Sure… but I get the feeling it's going to be a long one."

Then, without thinking too hard about it, he reached out and gently took her hand.

Haruka blinked, eyes widening. "Huh?"

"Come on," Yuu said with a small smile, tugging her lightly toward him. "Follow me."

Her feet moved before her mind could catch up, letting herself be guided as they stepped off the main sidewalk. The warmth of his hand lingered, even as he let go a moment later.

The two of them walked side by side, weaving past the occasional passerby, the dim glow of storefront signs reflecting in puddles, the gentle murmur of late-night chatter around them.

The world had quieted now, soft and hushed, like a stage with its curtains drawn halfway closed.

Eventually, they turned a corner and emerged at a small, tucked-away park.

The playground sat in a pocket of shadows and amber streetlight, empty save for the soft rustle of trees overhead. A swing swayed faintly in the breeze, creaking just once before falling still.

Yuu walked ahead and lightly tapped the metal bar of the jungle gym before looking back at her.

"This spot's quiet, Good place for long stories."

Haruka followed, her footsteps light on the gravel.

She gave him a look, half-curious, half-amused, as she settled onto one of the nearby benches, brushing her hands against the hem of her hoodie.

"You're surprisingly good at this." She murmured to herself.

"It's just… nice to have moments like this, right?"

She looked up at the sky, the moon just barely visible between shifting clouds.

"…Yeah. It is."

Haruka closed her eyes.

The soft rustle of trees overhead filled the silence, and for a while, the only sound between them was the hush of wind against leaves and the distant chime of a train crossing far away.

Then she began to speak.

"…There was a girl named Mai. She was in ASRUN with me."

The way she said the name carried weight, like handling something delicate and worn by time.

"She told me once… that the reason she became an idol was because she saw me on stage. Just once. And that was enough for her to want to stand beside me."

Yuu listened quietly, his gaze turning toward her without interrupting.

"She worked so hard, Always chasing, always trying to catch up. I think… I reminded her of a version of herself she wanted to be."

Her voice softened.

"And I… admired that about her."

She took a slow breath, then leaned forward slightly, her hands clasped between her knees.

"But after three years, things started to change. She began falling behind in practice. The choreography wouldn't stick like it used to. She'd space out during music drills. Our coach thought it was fatigue, but…"

A bitter laugh slipped through her breath.

"I thought I could help her. I told her to keep practicing. That if she just pushed through it, she'd get better. I really believed that. Because that's how I got better."

She paused.

The light in her eyes dimmed with memory.

"But I was wrong."

The scene around them dimmed in Yuu's mind as Haruka's words folded into the rhythm of memory.

[Flashback Begins]

A studio lined with floor-to-ceiling mirrors, brightly lit and sterile.

Mai stood across from Haruka, her shoulders heaving with exhaustion, hands clenched at her sides. Her voice was hoarse, strained from too many practices back-to-back.

"I can't… I can't keep up anymore, Haruka!"

"You can, I know you can! Just a little more—"

"I trusted you!"

The words hit like a slap, sharp and cracked.

Mai's face twisted, anger, pain, and something deeper swimming behind her eyes.

“I listened to you. I practiced until my throat bled. I kept believing I’d get better.”

Haruka stepped forward, but Mai stepped back.

“Now look at me, my voice is ruined. My career’s gone. And you—you just stood there and told me to try harder.”

Silence.

“Maybe you were never trying to help me,” Mai said bitterly. “Maybe you just didn’t want to admit that not everyone’s like you.”

[Flashback Ends]

Haruka’s voice returned to the present, barely above a whisper.

“She damaged her vocal cords. Had to stop singing entirely. And I—”

She stopped, teeth catching the edge of her lower lip.

“—I believed I was the reason she lost everything.”

Yuu didn’t speak.

He let the stillness stretch between them, respectful and patient, while Haruka steadied herself.

“I couldn’t go back on stage after that. I couldn’t even look at one. The moment the lights hit me, I felt like I didn’t deserve to be there. That maybe I never did.”

She looked up now, the corners of her eyes shimmering faintly beneath the playground light.

“I turned down the offer to form a new group. I told Minori, Airi, and Shizuku they’d be better off without me.”

Yuu swallowed, the weight of her words settling into him.

“But… Mai came back. She apologized. Said she regretted blaming me. That she’d been angry. Scared.”

A slow breath left her.

“She didn’t ask me to come back. She just said she wanted me to know she didn’t hate me anymore.”

Haruka leaned back on the bench, lifting her eyes to the stars.

“I think that’s when I realized… being an idol isn’t about being perfect. It’s about showing up. Flawed, scared, tired—but still shining.”

She turned to Yuu.

“That’s why I’m here again. That’s why I can dance now. Because someone believed in me when I didn’t.”

There was silence again, thick and full.

Then—

“I’m glad you told me."

Haruka blinked.

“Not because it’s some big confession, but because you trusted me enough to say it.”

He offered her a small smile.

Haruka looked at him for a long moment, then gave a small, grateful nod.

The wind picked up again, brushing gently past them both.

The breeze tugged softly at the edges of Haruka's hoodie, strands of her hair brushing across her cheeks. Her gaze had drifted back to the empty playground ahead, but her voice, quiet and fragile, cut through the hush.

"Say... Hazuki-kun..."

"If I ever fall down the stage... or if the others do… will you pick me up?"

Yuu blinked, caught off guard not by the question itself, but by how gently it was delivered.

There was no drama behind it.

Just a calm, sincere request whispered beneath the stars.

He turned to look at her fully.

Haruka wasn’t looking at him.

Her eyes stayed fixed ahead, focused, but distant, as if already picturing some future where everything they’d built began to crumble again.

But her hand, resting loosely between them on the bench, trembled faintly.

Yuu took a breath.

“Of course I will, that’s part of the job, isn’t it?”

Haruka’s lips curved into the faintest smile. “Even if we fall hard?”

“I’ll still be there, even if you fall so hard you leave cracks in the stage.”

That made her laugh—a small, quiet sound, but it reached her eyes this time.

“Then I’ll rely on you,” she said.

“Please do, Because the truth is... watching you all work this hard, it makes me want to work just as hard to protect it.”

Haruka looked at him again, eyes soft, searching. For a moment, it felt like everything else, the wind, the rustling trees, even the distant world of idols—had faded out, leaving only the two of them in a small, suspended moment.

"…You're not what I expected, Hazuki-kun."

"I get that a lot."

Another smile—this one lingering longer—before Haruka stood from the bench and stretched, her arms rising skyward.

"Alright. Walk me the rest of the way, Assistant Manager."

Yuu stood as well, adjusting his bag on his shoulder.

"Yes, yes. As ordered, Kiritani-san."

With soft footsteps echoing over the quiet pavement, the two made their way down the dimly lit street, the city's glow casting long shadows ahead of them.

The evening air had cooled, carrying the faint scent of asphalt and jasmine from a nearby garden, the sounds of distant traffic murmuring like a lullaby.

Eventually, they reached a small intersection marked by a lone streetlamp, its flickering light bathing the sidewalk in a pale amber hue.

Haruka slowed her pace, then came to a stop just before the crosswalk.

"You can drop me off here."

Yuu stopped beside her. "Are you sure? It's still a bit of a walk."

Haruka gave a faint nod, her hands slipping into the pockets of her hoodie.

"It's fine. I've done this walk plenty of times. Besides, this is where the girlfriend in disguise parts ways with her manager escort, right?"

"Don't start with that again."

A light laugh escaped her lips. "I'm just teasing."

For a moment, they stood in silence, caught between the gentle hum of the streetlight and the hush of the hour.

Then Haruka stepped forward, the crosswalk signal beginning its silent countdown.

She paused just once more to glance back at him, the faint wind tugging at the edge of her hoodie.

"Good night, Hazuki-kun."

Yuu raised a hand in farewell. "Good night, Kiritani-san. Get some rest."

Haruka smiled, soft, real, and then turned away, her figure slipping across the street like a fading melody.

Yuu stood there for a while, watching her silhouette grow smaller beneath the city lights, until she turned the next corner and disappeared.

“Hah… That isn’t good for my heart…”

Yuu muttered the words under his breath, a faint flush still clinging to his cheeks as he rubbed the back of his neck.

The chill of the night nipped at his skin, but his chest still felt warm, stirred by the lingering echoes of Haruka’s smile, her voice, the faint squeeze of her presence beside him under the city lights.

He exhaled slowly and turned on his heel, hands in his pocket, as he made his way home through the sleeping neighborhood.

Streetlights shimmered like small stars above him, the quiet hum of his steps grounding him after such an unexpectedly personal evening.

When he finally reached the front of his house, he slipped off his shoes at the genkan with a soft thud and placed them neatly to the side.

His body felt heavy, not from fatigue, but from everything he was still processing.

The hallway was dimly lit, and the silence inside was broken only by the low hum of the television playing in the living room.

Yuu padded softly across the floor, peering into the room.

“Mom…” he whispered, spotting her curled up on the couch, fast asleep, a throw blanket half-fallen from her shoulders. The gentle flicker of the screen reflected against her face, casting long shadows across her features.

He reached for the remote to turn the TV off, but paused as his eyes caught the image on screen.

It was a live concert.

No—the live concert.

MORE MORE JUMP’s past show.

Haruka stood front and center, bathed in dazzling light.

Minori danced beside her, smile wide and infectious.

Airi and Shizuku followed, their voices harmonizing as their arms swept out in perfect unison.

The crowd roared behind the screen.

Glowsticks.

Cheers.

Flashing lights.

A wave of color.

It was overwhelming and beautiful.

Yuu stared, breath held for a moment, he didn't realize he was holding onto.

This was the Haruka he saw now in bits and pieces. The one who gave everything. The one who carried something so heavy behind every perfect step.

He slowly sank onto the floor, legs folded, eyes fixed on the screen.

"…You really were shining," he murmured.

But even stars had shadows.

And he was beginning to see them.

Chapter End Notes

Fact about Yuu Hazuki #3
Yuu Hazuki likes every character in Project SEKAI. He genuinely appreciates all their strengths, personality, and flaws, but of all the people he's met so far, there is one he secretly has a crush on…

…though he hasn't quite figured it out himself yet.

Chapter 34: Imprisoned Marionette (Part 1)

[Kanade Yoisaki POV]

1:00 AM
Kanade's Room – Dimly Lit

Clack... clack... clack...

The quiet sound of typing echoed through the room, interspersed with soft whirrs of her PC fan.

Yoisaki Kanade sat at her desk, expression faintly tired, yet determined.

Her eyes stayed locked on the monitor, its pale glow reflecting against the dark circles under her eyes.

With one final keystroke, the music file rendered.

The waveform was visualized across her screen like a fragile heartbeat.

"...The demo of the new song is done," she murmured under her breath.

A breath escaped her lips—not relief, not satisfaction. Just... stillness.

She leaned back slightly, brushing her bangs from her eyes.

“It’s... well-calibrated. But...”

Her thoughts wandered, unbidden, back to a memory long buried within the white fog of the EMPTY SEKAI.

[FLASHBACK – The EMPTY SEKAI]

A voice trembled through the desolate void, frustration laced with raw desperation.

"I'm tired! I look and I look and I look and I look! But I just can't find it... Then, when I look again, it's just not right, and I fall into despair... What am I even supposed to do?!"

Kanade stood before her, gaze unwavering.

“I’ll keep composing.”

“Huh?”

“Even if this song isn’t able to save you, I’ll keep composing until I find the one that does. I’ll keep composing... until you can find yourself.”

Kanade slowly closed her eyes, the image of her still vivid in her mind.

"Can this song really save you... Yuki?"

A sudden soft chime broke the silence.

[Notification: NIGHTCORD – 25:00]

Ping.

Kanade straightened up, blinking as her hands returned to the keyboard.

The group chat was already stirring.

[25:00 - Notification: Nightcord has started a call.]

She inhaled quietly, reached for her headset, and clicked into the call. The familiar chime echoed through her headphones.

"Heeeey~♪ How's everyone doing? Those songs aren't gonna write themselves!" Amia first spoke on the call

Kanade flinched slightly. It was late, and her ears were still ringing from hours of silent focus.

"Not so loud, Amia..." came Enanan's tired voice, heavy with exhaustion.

"Come on, Enanan, where's your enthusiasm? Be a bit more excited! We're making a new song today!"

"I can't. I still haven't recovered from the all-nighter I pulled to finish the drawings." A tired sigh followed. "Weren't you up all night with me as well, Amia? Where are you getting all that energy from, you stamina freak?"

"'Stamina freak'?! That's a terrible thing to call someone as cute and adorable as I!" Amia huffed with mock indignation, but her smile was audible. "But well, it's tiring to be cute these days, so I do need a lot of stamina! I'll take it as a compliment~ ♪"

"Whatever."

A pause.

"Where's Yuki?"

"Huh? Oh yeah, I didn't hear her," Enanan muttered, glancing at the corner of her screen. Her voice was tinged with confusion, though not surprise.

"Hm?" Amia leaned closer to her monitor. "But she's logged in, though…" She clicked a few times, confirming the status icon next to Yuki's name.

Kanade's voice came calm and even, cutting gently through the slight static of the call.
"Yuki, are you there?"

A pause.

"...Yes," came the soft, quiet reply.

Kanade gave a small nod to herself. "Okay, good."

Enanan let out a sigh, slumping into her seat on the other end of the call. “Sheesh, you could’ve spoken up sooner, don’t you think?”

“I’ll remember to do that next time,” Yuki said flatly, not sarcastically.

“Seriously, you…” Enanan began to grumble again, but her voice trailed off, exasperated but not unkind.

“There, there~!” Amia chimed in, her tone sparkling with cheer. “Why don’t we talk about the new song? I can’t wait to hear the demo ♪”

“I’m sending it over now,” Kanade said.

There was a brief rustle of digital movement as the file transferred.

And then—silence.

The air hung still as each member of Nightcord @25:00 listened, the quiet punctuated only by the gentle breathing picked up by their microphones.

The song,Kanade’s latest composition, unfolded in layers: delicate piano strains, a ghostly melody, harmonies that swelled and retreated like the tide.

It was both cold and warm.

Distant, yet personal.

A quiet desperation hidden beneath calm chords.

When the final note faded out, it took a moment before anyone spoke.

"...It’s so beautiful," Enanan breathed, her voice soft, almost reverent. “You’re awesome, K.”

“Yeah!” Amia chirped brightly. “There were already a few images floating through my mind while I was listening! I’m gonna try out all sorts of special effects during the hook ♪ . It’s gonna be so good with the visuals!”

“Okay, good. What about you, Yuki?”

A beat.

“What do you mean?” Yuki asked, her voice as flat as always.

“How did the song make you feel?” Kanade clarified gently.

There was a pause again.

“How… I thought it was very Kanade,” Yuki answered after a moment.

“I don’t think that’s what she meant,” Enanan cut in, half-sighing. “Was it good? Bad? Did you like it? Or hated it?”

“I didn’t hate it.”

“So you liked it then?” Amia pressed with a hopeful lilt.

“Not really, I think?”

“Huh?” Enanan blinked.

“If you liked something, you would feel that way, right? I didn’t feel that way.”

“I see…” Kanade murmured.

There was a short pause in the call.

Then Enanan’s voice cut in, sharper this time.

“Yuki, that’s not a very nice thing to say to K."

“I was just answering her question honestly."

Kanade finally spoke up, quiet but composed. “I’m fine, Enanan. Thank you, though. And you too, Yuki. Thank you for being honest with me.”

Mafuyu responded after a brief silence.

“...Sure.”

Then, another pause.

“I’m heading off for bed first,” she added, still with that same calm, glassy tone. “Good night.”

“Good night."

“Bye, Yuki~!” Mizuki sang cheerfully.

Disconnect.

The quiet sound of the call ending was followed by a brief, weighty silence. Then Ena let out a sigh sharp enough to cut glass.

“She’s finally gone. It’s so tiring to deal with her.”

“Whoa~,” they said, feigning shock. “Dropping snide remarks the moment she logs off? Who’s a scary selfie girl? Enanan, that’s who!”

“H-Hey! Who are you calling a scary selfie girl?” Ena barked back, flustered.

Mizuki giggled, clearly enjoying the teasing. “Isn’t it cute how it just rolls off the tongue? Scary selfie girl~!”

“You’re making me sound like some kind of monster,” Ena grumbled. Then, quieter, more honestly, she added, “...Look, I know it’s not Yuki’s fault that she’s like this.”

“Oh?” Mizuki tilted their head in mock surprise. “You do? That’s unexpected.”

“But that doesn’t mean I know how to handle it,” Ena said. Her voice dropped, losing its usual edge. “When we talked in SEKAI, she really got on my nerves. But at the same time… I think I kind of understood her. Somehow.”

She paused.

“Still,” she continued, “can either of you say you really get what’s going on in Yuki’s head? Or how she truly feels about what we’re saying?”

A moment passed. Then Kanade’s voice came through, quiet and hesitant.

“I…”

Mizuki cut in, more subdued now. “Well… the thing is, she’s being a lot more honest with us than she used to be, right? That has to mean something.”

“Yes, but…” Ena’s voice trailed off, her frustration lingering.

Kanade sat at her desk, still staring at the glowing screen, her hands unmoving. The words lingered in her mind, unspoken, but burning.

(Enanan is right… We still don’t really understand Yuki very well. Not completely. And if I can’t understand her… there’s no way I could compose a song that would ever reach her, much less save her.)

She murmured to herself, barely audible over the soft whirr of her PC fan.

“I need to try harder… to understand her feelings.”

Morning arrived.

Light filtered weakly through the curtains of Kanade’s room, casting a pale glow across the floor strewn with music sheets and empty teacups. She blinked slowly at the screen in front of her, rubbing her tired eyes.

A song that will save Yuki...
I’ll keep composing.

She had said that to herself last night.

A bold declaration made in the quiet dark.

I made that bold statement out of desperation… but… I still don’t know what kind of song would save her. Still, I just have to compose one…

Her fingers lingered above the keyboard.

“There’s no meaning to my existence otherwise.”

Ding dong.

Kanade flinched slightly at the sound of the doorbell.

. Then she blinked, recalling the date.

“Oh, right,” she mumbled to herself, slowly standing from her chair. “Today’s the day Ms. Mochizuki comes over to clean.”

Yoisaki House – Kitchen

Kanade opened the door to find a smiling figure standing politely with her hands folded.

“Hello, Ms. Mochizuki.”

“Good morning! Today is cleaning day, right?” Honami said cheerfully, already slipping off her shoes.

Kanade nodded. “Yes. Please do the kitchen today… and the bathroom, too.”

“You got it. I’ll get started right away.”

Honami began setting down her supplies, but then paused and turned back toward Kanade.

“Oh, by the way, I brought some flavored teas with me today. Would you like a cup later?”

“Yes,” Kanade said softly. “Thank you…”

“Great! I’ll make the tea once I finish cleaning. I’ll let you know when it’s ready!”

Kanade offered a small nod, then turned away, her steps slow and soundless as she made her way back to her dim room. The click of her door closing was the only sound left behind.

An hour passed.

Kanade, now hunched over her desk, gave a small sigh of relief. “I think I’m done brushing up the bass part.”

She leaned back slightly in her chair, letting her eyes drift toward the wall.

“Ms. Mochizuki should be almost done with her work, too…”

Her gaze softened.

Grandma really surprised me when she arranged for a home care service… but now I think it was the right thing to do. A dirty room lowers my work efficiency. And… her cooking is really good, too…

Knock knock.

“Ms. Yoisaki, I’ve finished cleaning! Would you like some tea?”

Kanade rose from her chair with a quiet breath. “Coming…”

Kitchen

As she stepped into the freshly cleaned kitchen, a sweet aroma greeted her nose. She paused.

"…It's so fragrant."

Honami beamed. "I know, right? This one's white peach-flavored tea. Please, enjoy!"

Kanade took the cup gently and sipped.

"…Thanks. It's really good."

"Really? I'm glad you like it! That's a relief."

"…Relief?"

"Mm-hmm," Honami said with a small smile. "Because you seemed a little down today. I'm just relieved to see you smile."

Kanade blinked. Her expression barely changed, but something in her chest tightened, like a quiet warmth blooming under cold water.

"…You're an amazing person, Ms. Mochizuki. You're good with housework… and you even show concern for me."

"Oh—no, I just… I like doing housework, that's all," Honami said, flustered. "I'm really glad I took up the suggestion from my mom's friend to work part-time as a housekeeper. Being a helper is so much fun."

"…It is?"

Honami nodded. "Helping someone in need and making them happy makes me happy too. Though… that does mean I tend to be a bit of a busybody sometimes."

Kanade stared at the amber liquid in her cup.

"…Could I ask you for advice on something?"

"Of course. What is it?"

"There's someone I'm trying to help… but sometimes I just don't know what to do." She hesitated. "What would you do in a situation like that?"

"Well…" Honami tapped her chin. "First, I'd listen carefully to what that person has to say. Different people want to be helped in different ways, after all."

"…What if that person doesn't understand how they want to be helped?"

"Then… I'd listen harder," Honami said with a gentle laugh. "Get to know them more. You might be helping them just by understanding their feelings and what's weighing on their heart."

Kanade listened, unmoving.

"There are some people who try to carry everything by themselves, so they don't trouble others. But for someone like that, just having someone be there for them can already become a bright spot. It can give them happiness."

“…Get to know the person more, huh…”

“Oh, but be careful, some people don’t like being asked too much about personal things..." She paused, then laughed a little to herself. "Um, I’m sorry, that probably wasn’t very good advice…”

“No, It was. Thank you, Ms. Mochizuki. I think… I’ll try to get to know that person better.”

“I hope you can give them the help they need.”

“…I hope so, too.”

Kanade placed the cup down gently and stood.

“…Thank you. See you next week.”

“Of course! Have a good day, Kanade-chan~!”

Honami paused just as she reached the front door, her hand resting lightly on the handle. She turned back, her expression thoughtful.

“By the way, Ms. Yoisaki… Are you, by any chance, interested in dolls or puppets?”

Kanade blinked, the question catching her off guard.

“Dolls…?” she repeated quietly.

Honami nodded, her smile brightening. “Yes. There’s a doll exhibit happening at a nearby gallery. I was thinking, maybe you could stop by if you’re ever in the area?”

She reached into her bag and retrieved a slim envelope. “A friend gave me some tickets. He thought I’d enjoy it, but I already have plans this week, so I won’t be able to go. There are four tickets in total. He just handed them to me out of the blue.”

Kanade tilted her head slightly. “A friend of yours?”

Honami laughed, a little sheepishly. “Yeah. He’s a mystery, honestly. A little strange, but in a good way. When I looked it up later and saw it was a doll exhibit, I thought of you. You once told me that looking at artwork sometimes helps you come up with music, right? So maybe dolls could give you a new kind of inspiration.”

Kanade’s gaze drifted down to the envelope in Honami’s hand. The thought of a room filled with silent, crafted figures was oddly compelling. Her fingers twitched with curiosity.

“You don’t have to go, of course,” Honami added quickly, waving a hand. “I just thought it might be nice. But if it doesn’t sound interesting-”

“I’ll take them,” Kanade said quietly, stepping forward to accept the tickets. “Thank you.”

Relief and delight flickered across Honami’s face. “Great! I hope you find it inspiring. Or at least interesting.” She opened the door, a soft summer breeze slipping through. “Well then, see you next week.”

Kanade gave a small nod. “See you.”

The door closed with a gentle click.

Silence fell again in the house, broken only by the distant hum of her computer still running in her room.

Kanade stared down at the envelope in her hand, then turned it over slowly.

"…A doll exhibit," she murmured. Her voice, quiet as ever, carried a note of wonder. "I wonder what kind of inspiration something like that might hold."

She clutched the envelope a little tighter as she returned to her room.

Chapter 35: Imprisoned Marionette (Part 2)

The faint hum of Kanade's laptop was the only sound filling her dimly lit room, save for the occasional ping from Nightcord. One message after another began to appear in the group chat window, glowing faintly against the screen.

Mizuki:
Time to get cracking, everybody!

Ena:
Yeah, yeah. By the way, K, I've completed a few design drafts. Can you take a look?

Kanade adjusted her posture, fingers hovering over the keyboard.

Kanade:
Okay. How's your progress, Yuki?

Mafuyu:
I have a few versions ready for you to check as well.

Kanade:
Okay, just a moment.

Her eyes scanned the screen, then clicked open Ena's illustration files first.

(Let's see what Enanan's been working on...)

A few sketches loaded onto her screen. They weren't polished yet, but each brushstroke bore Ena's distinct perspective. The expressions of the characters, the colors, everything reflected her interpretation of the song's atmosphere in a way Kanade couldn't articulate aloud.

(They're good.)

(You can feel her ideas in them… her personal reading of the music.)

She moved on to the lyric file attached to Mafuyu's message.

(Now for Yuki's lyrics...)

The lines were sharp, thoughtful, her word choices as careful and refined as always. But this time, something was different.

(Her past lyrics, back when she called herself "OWN," were like knives, honest and suffocating, full of something bitter and raw.)

(Now, though... it's gentler. Quieter.)

(Her words still draw me in, but they don't reveal much. It's like reaching out to someone just beyond a veil, so close, yet impossible to touch. I feel like I understand her more through her lyrics than I do in actual conversation, but... her heart is still distant.)

(I want to get closer to it.)

A soft chime interrupted her thoughts.

Ena:
Man, my shoulders are so stiff now. Hey, mind if we take a break?

Mizuki:
We should! K and Yuki, okay with that?

Kanade:
I'm okay.

Mafuyu:
Okay.

Mizuki:
Thanks! Speaking of stiff shoulders, I've been getting them a lot recently, too. I wonder why?

Ena:
Probably just a lack of exercise in your case? You don't even attend gym classes, right?

Mizuki:
I do—when I'm actually at school! That said, that's not very often... But I'm still more active than K!

Ena:
That's not really an accomplishment.

Mizuki:
Touché. It's true I rarely go outside, though. All the fashion brands I like are available online, and I can watch all the anime and movies I want from home. But I wouldn't mind going out for something... unique. Something fun.

Kanade stared at the chat a moment, then her fingers began to move again.

Kanade:
Oh, in that case, do you want a doll exhibit ticket?

Ena:
Doll exhibit?

Mizuki:
Doll exhibit, huh? Like antique dolls and stuff?

Kanade:
Apparently. The one on the ticket looks like something you'd like. Lots of doll types will be on display—mechanical dolls, marionettes, and more. I thought it might be a good source of inspiration.

Mizuki:
Oooh, now that sounds interesting! I've always wanted to make vintage-style dresses. This could help with design ideas!

Kanade hesitated, remembering the quiet envelope still sitting on her desk. The memory of Honami's words returned, echoing softly in her mind.

Mizuki:
Hey, in that case, why don't we all go?

Kanade:
All of us?

Ena:
Why? I doubt K received four tickets, anyway.

Kanade glanced at the envelope again. She typed slowly.

Kanade:
Actually... I got four tickets.

Mizuki:
Then it's perfect♪ Fate wants us to go together!

Ena:
And I'm asking why we have to go together. I'm not into dolls or puppets.

Mizuki:
Aww, come on. It's not every day we get to hang out with K in person, you know?

Ena:
That's true...

Mizuki:
Besides, what if they spark ideas for your art? You always say you need to take in inspiration to make better illustrations.

Ena paused a long while before replying.

Ena:
Yeah, I guess. I've never really paid attention to dolls before, so it might be something new.

Mizuki:
See? That's the spirit! And Yuki's coming too!

Mafuyu:
I am?

Mizuki:
You never know—maybe the exhibit will help you write even better lyrics. And more importantly, it could be fun. Genuinely fun. Don't you think so?

As the conversation scrolled, Kanade stared at her screen. Her hand hovered above the keyboard, motionless. Then a voice echoed in her mind, Honami's voice.

"Then, I'd listen harder. Get to know that person more."

Kanade took a breath and typed.

Kanade:
Hm... Would you like to come with us, Yuki?

Mafuyu:
Anything’s fine.

Mizuki:
Then you’re coming! Now, what day works best? Yuki and Enanan have school on weekdays, so how about next Saturday?

Mafuyu:
I have cram school until noon on Saturday. I need to be home by 5:00 PM.

Mizuki:
Which means you can join us from noon until 5:00?

Mafuyu:
If that’s okay with everyone.

Mizuki:
Of course it is! Then it’s settled—Saturday at noon it is♪

Ena:
Saturday noontime, got it.

Kanade remained quiet as the others continued chatting and making idle jokes. She leaned back slightly, letting her thoughts drift.

(Maybe… this will help me understand her better.)

The chat remained active for a while longer, but for Kanade, the idea had already taken root, a simple outing, yes, but maybe, just maybe, it would bring her closer to the quiet truth behind Yuki’s eyes.

Saturday – Asahina Household, Living Room

"I'm heading for cram school now, Mom." Mafuyu stood by the doorway, her school bag neatly slung over one shoulder, posture as straight and pristine as ever. A pleasant smile, carefully rehearsed and polished through years of habit, curved her lips. "I’ll be out for a little while after class, but I’ll be home by around five."

Her mother glanced up from the table, where she was sipping a pale cup of green tea. "Oh? Where are you going after class?"

"To the art gallery," Mafuyu replied softly. "An acquaintance of mine received complimentary tickets and invited me."

"How wonderful," her mother said, voice light with polite interest. "What kind of exhibition is being held?"

Mafuyu hesitated just for a second—barely noticeable—before answering. "It's about dolls."

Her mother blinked. "Dolls?"

"Yes," Mafuyu confirmed. "There'll be many kinds on display... antique dolls, mechanical ones, and marionettes, I think."

Her mother's smile remained gentle, but Mafuyu could see the faint shift behind her eyes. "That sounds lovely," she said at last, setting her cup down with a quiet clink. "Still, wouldn't something a bit more educational or emotionally enriching suit you better? Paintings, for example. There's a new exhibit on Vermeer and Monet opening soon. Their works are so moving… so full of soul. You've always appreciated that, haven't you?"

Mafuyu tilted her head slightly. "I see. Shall we go see the paintings together another day, then?"

Her mother's smile returned in full. "Yes, another day. Since your friends were thoughtful enough to invite you today, it wouldn't be polite to refuse. Have a good time, and work hard in class, alright?"

"I will. Bye," Mafuyu said, bowing her head respectfully.

She stepped out the door, the quiet click of it closing behind her sounding oddly final.

The moment she was alone, the practiced smile slipped from her face like a discarded mask.

Her eyes dulled, her posture loosened—still composed, but without the faint sparkle she always wore at home.

Her lips parted as she walked down the stone path to the street, muttering to no one in particular.

"Emotionally enriching..."

She let the words hang in the air for a moment before exhaling.

"It doesn't matter what the exhibition is about. I won't feel anything."

Her voice was as empty as her expression.

Kanade's quiet voice from a few nights ago echoed in her mind.

"How did the song make you feel?"

Mafuyu's pace slowed.

"I don't..." she whispered, almost to herself.

"...feel anything."

She kept walking.

[Scramble Crossing – Shibuya]

The screens above blared advertisements and music videos, casting flickers of light over the sea of people crisscrossing the famous intersection.

Footsteps blended with the low hum of conversation and the occasional honk of impatient taxis. The chaos of Shibuya moved as if in rhythm; everybody had somewhere to go.

Kanade stood at the edge of the crossing, hugging her tote bag close, her eyes scanning the crowd. The straps of her cardigan fluttered slightly in the breeze.

Did I come too early...?

She fidgeted with the hem of her sleeve, brushing a loose thread between her fingers.

Then, just ahead, faintly framed by the drifting crowd, came a figure she recognized.

"...Yuki," Kanade called out, then quickly corrected herself. "I mean... Mafuyu. Over here."

Mafuyu’s gaze shifted to her. She approached without hurry, stopping beside Kanade with all the grace of a porcelain doll.

"...You're alone?" Mafuyu asked, her voice barely above the city noise.

Kanade nodded. "Yes. Ena and Mizuki haven’t arrived yet."

"I see."

A hush settled between them. Neither reached for small talk. The sounds of the city filled the space where words might have gone.

"...Um—"

"I'm heeere!" a voice sang out, cutting through the silence like a sudden breeze.

Mizuki weaved through the crowd, arms raised in greeting. The contrast between her bright expression and the bustling gray of Shibuya was like someone turning on a neon sign in a dim room.

"You're both so early!" she beamed.

"Mizuki," another voice called, chasing just behind. "Don’t just run off like that."

Ena emerged next, breath short but sharp-eyed, brushing her bangs from her face as she caught up.

Kanade blinked. "You two came together?"

"Nah," Mizuki replied, resting her hands on her hips. "Just bumped into each other on the way. Honestly, I’m utterly flabbergasted that Ena didn’t oversleep today, though."

"Are you trying to say I’m always late?" Ena narrowed her eyes.

Mizuki tilted her head playfully. "Am I wrong?"

"Do you want me to prove you wrong?"

"Well, anyway, let's go for that doll exhibit!"

With that, the four began walking in step, the noise of Shibuya fading behind them as they headed toward the quiet corridors of the doll gallery.

[Doll Exhibition – Gallery Hall]

The gallery's entrance opened into a wide, softly lit hall, the air tinged with a faint scent of wood and old textiles. Velvet ropes guided the flow of visitors, and classical music murmured gently from hidden speakers, adding a sense of quiet grandeur to the space.

Ena paused at the threshold, arms crossed. "Huh. This is a pretty big venue," she remarked, scanning the vaulted ceilings and marble floors. "I thought it'd be a lot smaller."

"Yeah," Kanade nodded beside her, eyes wide as she took in the elegant displays and ornate lighting. "It's... impressive."

"Wow...!" Mizuki's voice rose in wonder as she darted forward, practically bouncing on her heels. "The dolls are so cute! Look at them! And this one even has furry ears! How do you even make puff sleeves that tiny?!"

She pressed close to a glass case, hands cupped beside her face, marveling at the delicate craftsmanship of a doll clad in a pale blue dress.

"Hang on, this design would look super good on you, Kanade!" she grinned, twirling dramatically toward her.

"M-Me?" Kanade blinked.

"Shut up, Mizuki," Ena cut in, dragging a hand across her face. "We don't need a running commentary on every single thing you see, okay?"

"Yes, ma'am!" Mizuki saluted theatrically. "As you wish~!"

"For crying out loud…" Ena muttered, walking ahead.

Kanade stepped closer to a doll perched atop a miniature settee, its glassy eyes seeming to follow her as if it breathed its own quiet life.

"It's... amazing," she murmured. "Each doll has its own world."

"World?" Mafuyu echoed softly, her voice as calm and blank as her face.

"Yes," Kanade nodded. "You can tell what sort of world they live in just by looking at them. Their clothes, their posture, even their expression—it all says something."

"Right," Mafuyu replied, her gaze fixed on a porcelain child in a vintage dress, hair perfectly curled.

Kanade turned toward her and froze.

"...Ah."

"What's wrong?" Ena asked, tilting her head.

“Mafuyu’s expression just changed,” Kanade said slowly, brows drawing together.

“Did it?” Ena leaned over to look but shrugged. “Looked the same to me.”

“Anyway,” she added, brushing her bangs aside, “hurry up. Let’s go further in.”

“...Yes,” Mafuyu replied, her voice faint.

Footsteps clicked softly against the polished floors.

Why did she have that look on her face just now? Kanade thought as she followed behind. There was something… fleeting. Like a crack in her mask. I need to understand her better—her feelings, her thoughts.

But how...?

“Why does this one look so lifelike?” Ena said, kneeling slightly to peer into a case. “Is it the complexion color?”

“Hmm,” Mizuki mused, crouching beside her. “Maybe the eyes. Look how the light catches them. They sparkle, like they’re about to blink...”

“Oh, hey—there are more works from the same artist over there,” Ena pointed, already moving toward the next display.

“Let’s go see! Ooh, there’s even a shop here!” Mizuki clapped her hands. “I have to check it out later~!”

Kanade’s gaze remained on Mafuyu, who had drifted to the edge of the display, her posture rigid.

“Is there anything that catches your eye, Mafuyu?” Kanade asked gently.

Mafuyu didn’t turn her head. “Not really.”

“I see...”

“I’m going to the washroom,” she added a moment later, already turning away.

“Oh, okay.”

Kanade watched as Mafuyu slowly disappeared down the hall, her figure swallowed by the quiet hum of the gallery. There was something distant in her gait. Mechanical, almost.

The dolls around them stared wordlessly, their painted smiles frozen in time.

[Mafuyu – POV]
Gallery Hallway, Near the Restrooms

Mafuyu walked slowly, heels clicking faintly against the marble floor. The further she moved from the main exhibition hall, the quieter everything became.

The distant murmurs of other visitors faded into a soft hum behind her, replaced by the ambient hush of solitude.

She rounded a corner.

"…Hm?"

A display stood to the side of the corridor, tucked near a dim wall sconce, perhaps an overflow exhibit or a piece meant to be discovered.

Unlike the others, it wasn't surrounded by velvet ropes or visitors.

Mafuyu stopped.

Her eyes fell upon the doll inside.

Long, flowing blonde hair cascaded in thick, soft waves down its back.

A large bonnet, decorated with red roses and intricate lace, sat gently atop its head, tilted at a slight, deliberate angle.

The doll wore a black and white Victorian-style dress. The bodice was laced tight, corset-like, pressing against a tiny porcelain waist.

Puffy white sleeves ended in lace cuffs, and the skirt flared into layered petticoats edged with embroidery.

But what caught Mafuyu's eye were the legs, covered in red and black harlequin-patterned tights, twisted slightly as if mid-dance.

And above it all, thin strings held the doll aloft, suspended from a metal frame.

A marionette.

Mafuyu thought.

Her eyes narrowed faintly.

(Why does this one feel so… different from the rest?)

She stepped closer, her own reflection faint in the glass. The doll's glass eyes, a clear shade of blue, stared straight ahead, unblinking.

Empty.

Controlled.

Beautiful.

And then—

"You're such a good girl."

A woman's voice. Gentle. Familiar. But not comforting.

Mafuyu gasped—sharp, audible.

Her hand flew to her mouth.

The voice wasn't loud. It hadn't echoed through the hallway. Yet it felt like it had been spoken directly into her ear, bypassing her senses and lodging somewhere deep in her chest.

She looked down, heart hammering, her breath quickening.

Cold. She felt cold.

"Uhm… Excuse me."

She flinched at the second voice. Male. Real.

Familiar.

Slowly, stiffly, she turned her head.

There, standing a short distance away, was—

"...Are you okay?" he asked again.

His eyes held concern.

Huh…?)

There was something vaguely familiar about the boy standing in front of her—messy dark hair, soft features softened further by concern, and those eyes… quiet, observant, almost too gentle for the world.

Mafuyu blinked.

Once.

Then again.

(I've… seen him before, haven't I?)

The boy tilted his head slightly, recognition blooming across his face. "Wait… Are you… Mafuyu Asahina-san?"

Her full name.

Spoken aloud.

"…Huh?" Her voice was barely audible. Thinner than she expected. "Hazuki…-san?"

"I didn't think we'd run into each other here. In a museum, of all places."

But Mafuyu couldn't respond.

Her vision swam. The room felt narrow, warped, like a hallway in a dream.

The distant hum of gallery murmurs grew muffled in her ears.

She was breathing too quickly.

Huff… Huff…

"Inhale… Exhale… Asahina-san…"

Hazuki's voice was still calm, but it felt distant, muted under the pounding in her ears.

Then, a new voice cut through it all.

"Mafuyu?!"

Footsteps, fast, hurried.

Kanade's voice. Clear and urgent.

She rushed into view and reached out, steadying Mafuyu by the shoulders. "Mafuyu, you're really pale! What happened? Are you feeling sick?"

Mafuyu's gaze drifted over to the display again.

"The… doll," she murmured, voice barely forming the words.

Kanade turned, following her line of sight to the marionette suspended in the case. "This one? You mean this doll here? What about it?"

"It makes me sick," Mafuyu whispered.

Kanade blinked. "Huh?"

More footsteps now. Heavier. Quicker.

"There you are!" Ena skidded around the corner, panting. "Whoa, what's going on?! Wait a sec—Hazuki-san?!"

"Yuu-kun?!" Mizuki's voice piped in from behind her.

Also—Mafuyu! Are you okay? You don't look good at all!"

Mafuyu was surrounded now. Eyes on her. Voices colliding around her like static.

Huff… Huff…

But she steadied herself.

Raised her chin.

"I'm fine now," she said, though her breath was still uneven. Her fingers curled slightly into the fabric of her skirt.

Yuu looked at her for a moment longer, then said gently, "For now… I think it's better if Asahina-san goes home."

"I'm fine... really," Mafuyu murmured, her voice thin as paper but insistently steady.

Kanade stepped forward, her brows furrowed with concern. “Mafuyu… did that doll make you feel something?”

“Huh? Doll?” Ena echoed, glancing at the marionette with a puzzled look.

She turned fully toward the glass case, where the doll still sat motionless, long blond hair curled beneath a rose-adorned bonnet, its glass eyes staring blankly ahead.

The strings above it trembled slightly from the central air conditioning, but it may as well have been alive with the weight it carried in Mafuyu’s gaze.

Kanade’s voice came again, softer this time, almost tentative. “Why did that doll make you feel sick?”

Mafuyu’s lips parted, but she didn’t speak at first. Her eyes remained fixed on the floor, and the silence that followed was heavy.

“…Because…” Her breath caught.

“I don’t know,” she finally said. “I only know that I felt sick.”

There was something about the way she said it, so distant, like she was looking inward and couldn’t find the words to match what she saw.

Mizuki took a half-step between them, smiling gently though the concern in their eyes didn’t fade. “Hey, Kanade… not that I don’t get why you’re asking, but maybe now’s not the best time? Mafuyu’s clearly not feeling great. Let’s take Yuu-kun’s advice and talk about it later, okay?”

Kanade’s fingers tightened slightly at her sides.

(But I was so close… so close to understanding what could have shaken Mafuyu’s heart so strongly.)

Her expression fell with a quiet sigh. “All right. Sorry.”

Mizuki turned to Mafuyu with a hopeful smile. “How about I walk you to the station, okay? Just in case?”

Mafuyu shook her head gently. “It’s fine. I can go home by myself.”

And without another word, she turned and began to walk.

Her steps were slow but firm, her figure gradually shrinking as she made her way down the corridor and disappeared around the corner. The others stood in place, watching her go—none of them daring to call out again.

The silence that followed felt stretched and hollow, filled only by the soft hum of the overhead lights and the muffled ambiance of the museum beyond.

Kanade’s voice was nearly a whisper.

“…Mafuyu.”

“More importantly…” Ena’s voice cut through the quiet as she narrowed her eyes at the newcomer. “What are you doing here, Hazuki-san?”

Yuu gave a half-smile, rubbing the back of his neck. “I got a ticket from a friend. Thought I’d drop by and take a look.”

Ena didn’t look convinced.

Kanade, still looking toward the direction Mafuyu had walked off in, slowly turned back to him. “Wait… Are you the one Mafuyu’s been talking about?”

“Oh—right.” Yuu straightened slightly. “I guess we haven’t been properly introduced yet. I’m Yuu Hazuki. I go to Kamiyama High.”

“Kanade Yoisaki,” she replied softly, dipping her head in a polite nod.

There was a small pause, the tension still lingering faintly in the air, when Kanade tilted her head. “By the way… Mafuyu mentioned meeting you in the Empty SEKAI, didn’t she? How exactly did you get in there?”

Yuu’s smile flickered, and he glanced to the side.

“Haha… I don’t know myself, actually,” he said with a shrug, trying to keep his tone light. (<-- Lying)

Mizuki stepped forward, eyes sparkling with playful suspicion. “Really now? That sounds super suspicious~”

Yuu gave a nervous chuckle, though his expression didn’t quite match the tone. “I guess I’m kind of a mystery even to myself.”

Ena crossed her arms, still staring at him with a mix of curiosity and scrutiny. “Well, at least you’re consistent.”

Kanade watched him quietly, her gaze calm but searching. Something about Yuu Hazuki didn’t quite add up, and yet, Mafuyu had spoken of him. Had opened up to him. That wasn’t something Kanade could ignore.

“…Still,” she said quietly, “thank you. For helping her back there.”

Yuu blinked. “I didn’t really do anything.”

“You were there, sometimes, that’s enough.”

Yuu remained quiet for a beat, his gaze drifting back toward the marionette that had left Mafuyu so shaken. The strings, the porcelain expression frozen in place, it lingered in his mind like an echo.

“…It’s probably not my place to say anything,” he said finally, voice low. “But… I’ve seen a lot of people deal with complicated feelings. And if I had to guess…”

He looked toward the others, his eyes lingering briefly on Kanade’s concerned expression.

“…Maybe Asahina-san saw herself in that doll.”

Kanade's brows furrowed gently. "What do you mean by that?"

Yuu shook his head slowly. "It's just a feeling. That's all."

The group fell silent. Even Mizuki, usually quick to break tension with a joke, kept still, watching Yuu with a faint trace of surprise.

Then, with a small exhale, Yuu turned on his heel.

"Well, I'm heading out," he said, offering a casual wave. "I already got a few dolls I wanted to take a closer look at."

"Ehh? Going home already?" Mizuki pouted, stepping forward with a bounce in their step. "Come on, let's hang out a little! We're already here!"

Yuu gave a half-smile, his tone light but unwavering. "I'll pass. No thanks."

"Booo," Mizuki whined, but didn't chase after him.

As Yuu walked off toward the venue exit, Kanade watched his back quietly, her thoughts churning.

(Mafuyu saw herself in that doll…?)

That unsettling image flickered in her mind again, pale strings, delicate lace, eyes devoid of light.

Kanade clenched her hands together, a quiet resolve stirring beneath her chest.

(I need to understand her better… before she breaks again.)

Chapter 36: Imprisoned Marionette (Part 3)

[Empty SEKAI — Kanade's POV]

The moment her shoes touched the faintly glowing floor of the Empty SEKAI, Kanade was met with the familiar, almost suffocating silence.

She glanced around.

"...It's always so quiet here," she murmured, her voice swallowed by the still air. "I wonder where she is today… Hopefully, I can find her quickly."

Her footsteps echoed lightly as she moved through the pale, desolate space.

The air was cool, sterile, almost, and the colors of the SEKAI remained subdued, like a world paused in thought.

Then, just ahead, a soft silhouette appeared against the hazy backdrop.

"Kanade?"

She looked up. "Ah—Miku!"

Miku stood alone beneath the flickering light of an overhead lamp, a string of yarn twined between her fingers in a delicate loop.

"I'm glad I found you so quickly," Kanade said, walking over.

"Hello," Miku greeted with a faint smile. "You're alone today?"

Kanade lowered her gaze.

"…I see. Thank you, Miku."

Miku smiled softly.

"I'm sure you'll understand her. Little by little."

Kanade clutched the hem of her sleeve.

"…I want to. I really do."

There was no wind in the Empty SEKAI, and yet Kanade could feel something stir. Something fragile, suspended by invisible strings—just like that marionette.

Except this time, she hoped… the strings could be gently untied.

Kanade nodded. "Yeah… Hm? Are you playing cat's cradle?"

Miku looked down at her hands. The loop twisted again. "Yes. Mizuki taught me. They said it might help pass the time when I'm by myself here."

“I see,” Kanade replied softly, watching the pattern form and vanish with each movement. “That’s very like them.”

A gentle silence fell.

“Why are you here today?” Miku asked, finally letting the string fall from her hands.

Kanade took a slow breath. “I wanted to ask you something.”

Miku tilted her head slightly.

“It’s about Mafuyu,” Kanade said. “Her feelings. I want to understand them better. I think that might be the key to writing the song that could save her. I’ve tried talking with her about so many things, but… I still don’t understand. So I thought maybe you would know something. Since… you were with her, back then.”

Miku's expression softened. She looked down at her hands.

“I see... But I don’t know what Mafuyu is feeling right now either. This SEKAI was born from her heart, but that doesn’t mean I know exactly how it’s changed.”

Kanade’s shoulders sank slightly. “Oh… That’s true.”

Miku paused.

“But… we can think about it together.”

Kanade blinked. Then nodded. “Thank you, Miku. That means a lot.”

She hesitated. Her voice lowered. “I think… I was close to understanding something today.”

Miku looked at her. “What happened?”

“There was a doll exhibit. We all went—me, Mizuki, Ena, and Mafuyu. When Mafuyu saw one of the dolls there, her expression completely changed. She looked… disgusted. Like something in her chest turned over just from looking at it.”

Miku’s gaze sharpened slightly. “What kind of doll was it?”

Kanade thought for a moment. “It was… a beautiful one. Dressed in lace, seated on a golden, cage-like pedestal. Her limbs were jointed… and I remember now—she was held up by strings. A marionette.”

Miku’s fingers twitched slightly.

“Marionette…”

Kanade leaned forward.

“What is it, Miku? Did you remember something?”

Miku stayed still for a moment, her voice unusually quiet.

“…Maybe the doll reminded Mafuyu of herself.”

Kanade's eyes widened.

She stared at Miku, stunned by how perfectly the words mirrored the thought that had haunted her earlier.

"…Huh? Yuu Hazuki… He said the same thing."

Miku turned to her, eyes calm but knowing. "Really?"

Kanade nodded slowly. "Yeah… he said maybe Mafuyu saw herself in that doll."

The silence stretched.

With a soft shimmer of light, the boundary between the real world and the Empty SEKAI loosened.

Kanade took one final glance at the quiet space, the lingering image of Miku still playing cat's cradle tucked into the corner of her thoughts.

Then, without a word, she stepped through—returning to the quiet of her room, the warmth of the SEKAI replaced by the cool silence of reality.

But as the last traces of her presence vanished from the Empty SEKAI…

A voice echoed faintly.

"You can come out now."

From behind a pillar, a figure emerged with a slow, sheepish gait—dark-haired, his hands casually in his pockets.

"…Ah. It seems I've been caught."

Miku didn't smile. She only tilted her head.

"You were eavesdropping."

Yuu gave a small nod, not bothering to deflect.

"…I just wanted to make sure that everything's good."

His voice wasn't defensive.

Just honest.

Quiet.

Like someone standing in the rain with no umbrella—not asking to be forgiven, but simply willing to get wet.

Miku watched him carefully.

The glow of the SEKAI made his silhouette seem hazier than usual, as if he belonged both here and didn't.

“…You care about Mafuyu too, don’t you?” she finally asked.

He didn’t answer right away.

“…I don’t know what I am to her. Or if I’m even anything at all. But…”

He glanced toward where Kanade had stood moments ago.

“…If she’s going to fall apart, I want to be there when it happens. Even if I can't stop it.”

Miku’s voice cut through the quiet.

“Hazuki-kun… it sounded like you knew this would happen.”

He tilted his head slightly, “Oh? Why is that?”

“Just a feeling.”

Yuu gave a quiet chuckle and looked away, the faintest smirk tugging at his lips. “Who knows… I guess I’m just good at reading others.”

He said it like a joke, but his eyes didn’t laugh.

As Miku continued to watch him, Yuu lowered himself onto the edge of the stage beside her, his gaze drifting toward the still horizon of the Empty SEKAI.

(I'm glad everything’s according to the script...) he thought, folding his arms over his knees.

(For a moment, I was worried... If I intervened too much, I thought the story event might break.)

His fingers idly traced a loose thread on his sleeve.

(But Mafuyu... I'm sure she's going to be fine.)

The thought wasn’t just hope, it was conviction.

A belief grounded in the quiet way things had begun to shift. Like a string pulled gently on a puppet’s hand, just enough to change the way it reaches out.

Beside him, Miku said nothing. But something in the air between them had changed.

…Meanwhile…

Mafuyu slowly opened her eyes.

(What? Where am I? It’s all dark… I thought I was working in my room. But now— I can’t move? I can’t speak… or open my eyes?)

A strange, stifling stillness pressed against her.

And then, she saw—not with her eyes, but within her mind.

(Huh? Isn’t this… the doll exhibit we visited today? Why am I here?)

“Whoa, look at that, Ena! Isn’t it amazing?” Mizuki’s voice rang out in delight.

“Huh. It’s… very well done, yes. It almost feels alive,” Ena replied with a hesitant tone.

(Mizuki? Ena?) Mafuyu’s thoughts churned. (Why does it feel like they’re looking at me…?)

“Hey, this doll has strings attached to it. Is it a marionette or something?” Ena asked, stepping closer.

“Ooh, interesting! I wish we could make it move around. Probably not gonna be easy though, considering the size of this thing.”

“Don’t touch it, Mizuki. It looks too expensive to damage.”

“Hey, that doll over there’s super cute too~♪”

Hurried footsteps echoed in the hall.

“I told you to stop running around!”

(Have I… turned into a doll?) Mafuyu thought, a strange calm sinking in. (Is that why I can’t move? That’s… impossible.)

...

(...But I don’t mind. Being a doll... it means I don’t have to do anything. I don’t have to think anymore. I don’t have to keep searching for something I can’t find. I just follow the strings—do what I’m told. That’s easier. Everyone would be happier that way, right?)

“Mafuyu.”

A voice—soft, warm.

(Huh…?)

“Kanade…”

“You’re feeling something right now. Tell me what it is.”

“Why? Why do you keep asking?” Mafuyu’s voice cracked—not from sound, but from thought. “I can’t feel. How many times do I have to tell you that? And even if I did… nobody cares—”

“That’s not true.”

Another voice.

Yuu’s.

He stood beside Kanade now, both gazing at her with quiet resolve.

“Mafuyu… tell us what you’re feeling.”

They spoke in unison.

Her heart jolted.

And suddenly, light filled her vision.

Gasp!

Mafuyu sat up, breathing hard.

(...Huh? Was that… a dream?)

A soft chime rang in her ears—Nightcord.

"K?"

"Kanade…?"

"Yes, it's me. I thought you went to sleep."

"I guess I logged in… then fell asleep. That's why I had that weird dream."

"Dream? What kind?"

"I turned into a doll. That disgusting marionette we saw today. I couldn't move or speak. Mizuki and Ena were looking at me. Then you… and Hazuki appeared."

"I was in your dream too?"

"Only for a little while."

"And… what was I doing in it?"

"You said something to me, I think… but I don't remember what."

"Oh."

Kanade hesitated.

"And how did that dream make you feel?"

"You're asking that again?"

"Sorry… I just really want to know. I want to understand you better. If I can see the world through your eyes—even just a little—I'll be one step closer to writing a song that can reach you."

"…I can't help you with that. I don't understand myself either."

"But—"

"I just… don't get it. I live my life every day, but nothing brings me joy. Everything feels so far away. Like I'm not really part of it."

"And yet… I can tell something vital is missing. But I can't figure out what. How do you even describe that?"

"Oh…"

Kanade stared at the blinking cursor, her hands still on the keys.

(I feel closer to her like this than I ever do face-to-face…)

(If she can’t explain her feelings, then maybe—)

"How about you put it into lyrics?"

"Lyrics…?"

"Yes. I mean, lyrics are words, but they’re different too. You don’t have to explain yourself clearly or find all the right answers. Just… turn what you’re feeling right now into a song."

Mafuyu stared blankly at the glowing screen in front of her, fingers motionless on the keyboard. A faint hum from her computer filled the silence of her room, broken only by the soft flicker of the Nightcord window. Her breath trembled as she typed.

"Turn what I'm feeling now into song lyrics...?"

"Yes. Can you try that? I think those lyrics will help me get closer to you, like the time you were posting as OWN."

Mafuyu's gaze softened, but only slightly. The mention of OWN stirred something heavy in her chest.

A memory.

A moment.

A voice.

Her reply came slowly.

"No. I can't do it."

"Why not? When you were posting as OWN—"

"That was because... the messy lump inside my heart forced its way out on its own. I didn't consciously try to write anything. It just happened. I can’t recreate that on purpose."

A hollow ache lingered in the pit of her stomach.

She leaned back slightly, as if trying to distance herself from the conversation, yet her eyes never left the screen.

Kanade stared at her own screen, troubled.

(What can I do if even Yuki doesn’t understand herself?)

She thought back to earlier, to that moment in the SEKAI, under the pale light, when she spoke with Miku.

And to the words Yuu Hazuki had said so casually, yet with such piercing accuracy.

("Maybe... it's because the doll reminded Mafuyu of herself.")

That single line echoed in her head.

And then—

"Oh, I get it... What about that marionette, then?"

"What?"

"That marionette you saw at the doll exhibit made you feel sick, remember? You even dreamed about becoming one. Could it be... that you saw yourself in that marionette?"

Mafuyu’s breath caught.

A sharp jolt ran through her chest, as if those words had pulled a string taut inside her.

(I... saw myself?)

(That hollow, elegant doll... beautiful but trapped, lifeless in a cage...)

(Is that really how I see myself?)

"So, Yuki... try to remember what you saw in that marionette. And turn that into lyrics."

Another pause.

Longer this time.

"...I can't..."

Kanade didn’t stop.

"Understanding your feelings might be the key I need to write a song that will save you. So please..."

There it was again, that word.

Save.

Save me.

From what?

From myself?

Mafuyu lowered her eyes, the light of the monitor reflecting faintly in the glassy sheen of her irises. For a moment, she sat still.

A soft exhale escaped her lips, almost a sigh, almost a surrender.

"...I don't know how this will turn out, but... fine."

And for the first time that night, Kanade smiled.

"Okay!"

With a faint chime, the screen blinked once—and Kanade's icon vanished from the call.

Mafuyu was alone again.

The pale glow of her monitor cast long shadows on the walls, flickering softly like the last warmth of a dying ember.

Her fingers lingered above the keyboard, unmoving.

"That doll… it made me feel sick because…"

Her voice trailed off into the silence.

"…I don't know."

She lowered her gaze.

Her expression remained neutral, but her chest ached faintly with frustration.

Why don't I know?

Why did it feel so awful, so familiar?

Her thoughts spiraled, looping back to the same unanswered questions.

This is going to just end up like the last time, she thought bitterly.

Another futile attempt.
Another reminder that no matter how much she tried, she was always left with emptiness.

But maybe…

She exhaled slowly, stood up, and closed her eyes.

The world around her shifted.

When she opened them again, she stood beneath the pale, colorless sky of the Empty SEKAI.

A gray breeze blew past her, quiet and surreal, stirring the hem of her uniform.

Up ahead, beneath a structure, two figures sat quietly.

Miku.

And beside her, Yuu Hazuki.

Mafuyu stopped, her lips parting slightly in surprise.

"…Miku and… Hazuki-san?"

Miku looked up and offered a soft smile. “Hello, Mafuyu.”

Yuu raised a hand in a casual wave. “Yo.”

“…Hello.”

There was a strange sense of peace between the two, like the silence had weight, but not in a suffocating way.

It felt… calm. As if Mafuyu had walked into a still lake without ripples.

“Kanade visited a short while ago, too,” Miku said, her voice gentle.

“Kanade did…?”

Yuu nodded, eyes soft behind his unassuming expression. “Yeah. She said she wanted to understand your feelings.”

Mafuyu glanced away.

The familiar numbness curled in her stomach, like old instincts returning.

“My feelings…” she murmured, her voice flat. “It’s not like she can do anything even if she did. I don’t need something so unpleasant, painful, and utterly useless.”

The wind stirred again.

Miku turned slightly, looking at Yuu.

Yuu, in turn, met Mafuyu’s gaze.

“They’re not useless."

“…Huh?”

Mafuyu blinked.

She looked at him.

His tone hadn’t changed.

There was no judgment in his voice, no pity.

Just quiet certainty.

Mafuyu’s voice broke the silence, soft and hesitant.

“…What do you mean?”

“That feeling you had when you saw the marionette, the sickness in your chest, the way it stuck with you even after you left the exhibit… it meant something, didn’t it?”

Mafuyu’s gaze lowered. Her fingers curled at her sides.

“I don’t know what it meant.”

Yuu turned his eyes back to her. “But it still stayed with you. That’s enough.”

She blinked. “…Enough for what?”

“It means there’s something inside you that reacted. Something that hasn’t given up—even if you think it has.” His voice wasn’t dramatic, nor did he try to sound inspiring. He simply stated it as if it were a fact. “Feelings like that don’t come from nowhere.”

“I didn’t want to feel anything,” she whispered. “I didn’t ask for it. I didn’t choose that reaction.”

“You don’t have to choose it, it just means you’re still human. That there’s a ‘you’ in there somewhere, even if you can’t find her right now.”

She felt like he had reached into something she hadn’t realized was exposed.

“I don’t want to be human, I don’t want to keep feeling things I can’t understand.”

Yuu didn’t look away.

“…Yeah,” he murmured. “I know that feeling too.”

She looked at him sharply. “You do?”

“I didn’t say it was the same, but I’ve been lost before. I’ve wanted to stop feeling. Thought it’d be easier. Sometimes I still wonder.”

Miku stood quietly beside them, watching.

“But I think, he reason you hated that marionette wasn’t because it was disgusting. It was because it wasn’t feeling anything—and something in you still could.”

Silence again.

Mafuyu slowly lowered her eyes, her lashes shadowing her face.

“That’s not… fair.”

Yuu tilted his head.

She took a breath. “It hurts.”

“…Yeah, it does.”

The silence in the EMPTY SEKAI was thick, the muted sky hanging overhead like a shroud. But something was beginning to shift.

“Everything you feel,” Miku said gently, her voice barely louder than the hush of the wind, “is an important part of you. Even the things that are unpleasant and painful. So… they’re not useless.”

Mafuyu’s breath caught.

“Everything is… a part of me,” she murmured, her words trembling as they left her lips.

Then her eyes fell on something small beside Miku and Yuu—something she hadn't noticed until now.

"…Why is there a doll here?" she asked, blinking. "It's a marionette. But… there are no strings."

She took a step closer, the figure small and fragile on the ground.

Its arms were limp, its wooden joints slightly worn. Yet no strings dangled from its wrists or shoulders.

"Miku, what—?"

"This doll has always been in your SEKAI, Mafuyu. You just never noticed it until now."

Mafuyu looked at her, startled. "What do you mean…?"

"Done," Miku said softly, lifting her hands. "Look, Mafuyu… I made a ladder."

She stretched her fingers apart.

A simple cat's cradle string pattern rested between them, interwoven loops and lines that held a delicate form. A tiny ladder, like something a dream could climb.

"…I didn't know you could play cat's cradle."

Yuu let out a short laugh. "I've been teaching her a few tricks."

"Mizuki taught me first, it's fun. I cut off the strings from the marionette and used them to make this."

Mafuyu's breath caught in her throat. Her eyes flicked to the doll again, stringless, resting quietly at Miku's feet.

Miku continued, her tone thoughtful and light, like she was explaining a secret.
"Strings are so interesting. You can use them to tie things together. Do needlework. Manipulate dolls. Or…" she glanced at her fingers, "you can use them to make shapes like this."

Mafuyu lowered her gaze.

The marionette, freed of its strings, looked almost peaceful now.

No longer suspended, no longer controlled.

"…A marionette without strings isn't a marionette anymore," she whispered. "But… that also means the doll is now free."

"Hey, didn't I tell you to do the spider web next?" Yuu said, nudging Miku.

She pouted slightly. "Yuu-kun, it's hard."

"Pfft… alright, alright. I'll teach you again—one more time."

The two of them bickered playfully, their voices like ripples in a pond.

Mafuyu watched in silence, watching the rhythm between them, the gentle familiarity.

She looked down, her hands curling slightly at her sides.

“…Okay,” she whispered. “I understand now. Thank you… both of you.”

Yuu looked up and gave a small nod, his smile soft and content.

Miku’s expression was gentle as ever, her hands still laced in the string.

The next day — 2:00 AM
Mizuki’s Room
Nightcord Call — [Mizuki’s POV]

The soft hum of the computer fan was the only sound filling Mizuki’s dimly lit room. Pale pink fairy lights flickered faintly along the edge of the ceiling, casting long shadows on the walls. The screen before them glowed with the familiar layout of the Nightcord call window. Three avatars hovered in the corner, but one was conspicuously missing.

Mizuki leaned back in their chair, arms loosely crossed as they exhaled through their nose.

“Hmm… It’s already been an hour,” they muttered, glancing at the time. “But Yuki’s still not here. Maybe she’s not feeling well again…”

A pause. A twinge of worry crept into their voice.

“I just hope she doesn’t suddenly vanish like before…”

A soft ping echoed from the speakers. Ena’s voice rang through, sharp as ever.

“I’m less stressed when she’s not around.”

Mizuki giggled lightly, eyes narrowing with mischief. “You say that, but I know you’re worried about her deep down inside. Enanan’s a huge softie under that tough exterior.”

“Excuse me?!” Ena snapped, her voice indignant but flustered.

Before the teasing could go further, “So anyway, did Yuki say anything to you, K?”

A second ping.

Kanade’s calm voice entered the call, as quiet and steady as always.

“Sorry. I forgot to mention. I asked Yuki to write some new lyrics… based on the feelings she had when she saw that doll.”

Both Mizuki and Ena echoed, surprised and confused.

“That doll?”

“Ohhh! So that’s why she’s not here. You wanted her to turn those feelings of disgust she had from looking at the marionette into lyrics?”

“Yes."

“Okay, but… I still don’t get it. What was Miku even trying to say when she told Mafuyu she might be seeing herself in that marionette? What does that mean?”

Mizuki paused, “Hm… I can sorta understand what she meant. Kinda… sorta.”

For a moment, they didn’t speak. A heavy silence hung between the three until Mizuki’s thoughts drifted—unbidden—into memory.

“Don’t you think it’d be better to spend time with those who can challenge you rather than kids who always need your help?” Mafuyu’s mother had said, her voice distant but sharp, echoing in Mizuki’s mind. “Then you’d actually be learning something as well. Make sure you’re valuing your own time.”

“Okay, I will,” Mafuyu had replied, calm and obedient.

Too obedient.

Mizuki blinked, their eyes clouding briefly.

That memory always left a strange, uncomfortable knot in their chest.

“…Yuki’s really obedient to everything her mom says,” Mizuki said quietly, voice tinged with sadness. “And a marionette is basically a puppet, right? So maybe… she thought the marionette was just like her. Always under someone else’s control.”

Ena scoffed. “That’s just silly. If you don’t like being manipulated, just speak up.”

Mizuki let out a weak laugh. “Yeah… true.”

But the laughter didn’t reach their eyes.

Ping.

Mafuyu’s voice broke through the silence.

“Sorry, I’m late. K, I’ve finished the lyrics. Take a look.”

A beat passed.

The call went quiet.

“…Did you really write this, Yuki?”

Mafuyu’s reply came a little slower, “What do you mean?”

Mizuki let out a soft breath, almost a laugh, but tinged with genuine surprise. “Because… it’s completely different from your usual stuff! And it’s not like OWN, either. This one feels… alive! It’s like I’m seeing a version of Yuki I’ve never seen before!”

Ena chimed in next, more composed, but her words held the same weight. “Yes. It really is very different from before.”

(…It’s so annoying she can write something like this too,) Ena muttered silently to herself, scowling at the screen.

Kanade’s voice entered then, “Yuki, may I turn this into a song?”

There was a pause before Mafuyu replied. “What about the new song?”

“I want to give these lyrics a song right now."

Mizuki immediately lit up.

“Me too! It'll be fun to make a music video for this! Right, Enanan?”

“I guess,” Ena responded with a shrug in her tone.

That was enough to make Mizuki grin like a cat. “Wow, Enanan’s being compliant? You’re full of surprises!”

“Tch,” Ena huffed. “Because if I say no, you’ll just go on and on about my ‘tough exterior’ again, won’t you?”

Mizuki giggled, feigning innocence. “No waaay! I would never!”

Then Kanade’s voice, soft as ever but carrying a rare warmth, floated through the call. “I’ll write a song that’s perfect for these lyrics, Yuki.”

There was a long pause on Mafuyu’s end. Then, finally—

“…Sure.”

One Week Later

The soft hum of Kanade’s finished track faded gently into silence. A calm stillness settled between them as the last note reverberated through their headphones. Then—

“What do you think?” Kanade’s voice came through the call, quiet but expectant.

Ena spoke up first, her tone almost reluctant, almost.

“…I think it’s amazing. This wasn’t the kind of song I expected from those lyrics. Not at all.”

“It’s like—moody pop music or something,” Mizuki added, an excited lilt in their voice. “And that’s incredibly cute! You really outdid yourself, K!”

“Thanks,” Kanade replied softly. “What about you, Yuki?”

A pause.

Then Mafuyu answered, her voice slow, as if searching for the right words.

“I… I don’t know. Just that there’s this dull pain in my heart. But… it feels better than the pain I felt when I went to the SEKAI before. Warmer. I didn’t know my lyrics could… become a song like this.”

Kanade's response came without hesitation, a gentle firmness behind her words.

"Yuki, you said before that you can't feel or understand happiness and joy, but I think you're wrong. I think… you've just convinced yourself you can't. Otherwise, how could you write lyrics like these?"

Mafuyu inhaled sharply, eyes widening.
"…!"

Mizuki's voice brightened with encouragement. "So maybe it's better for you to express yourself more openly!"

"…Express?" Mafuyu echoed, hesitant.

"Yeah! Try expressing your feelings in different ways," Mizuki said eagerly. "Like how you did this time with your lyrics! Maybe even drawings, like Enanan does, though the best way is still to say it out loud." A small laugh followed. "But hey, I get it. Some things just can't be said in words, right? So if you feel something, anything at all, then just be honest and spit it all out! Think you can try that? At least when you're with us, okay?"

Ena clicked her tongue but didn't hide the softness beneath her bluntness. "That would be a lot better than awkward silence."

Mizuki gasped dramatically. "Enanan, can't you say it a little nicer?"

Kanade cut through their bickering with gentle clarity.

"The more we can understand your feelings, the closer we'll be to making a song that could save you. And maybe… maybe you'll find the true self you've been searching for all this time."

There was a quiet beat before Mafuyu spoke again, her voice barely above a whisper.

"…Express anything I feel honestly… I don't know if I can do that. But I'll try."

Kanade's voice came back softly. "Okay."

And as the others continued talking, Mafuyu sat still for a moment, hands resting against the cool surface of her desk.

Her gaze fell to the lyrics she'd written, words that had once felt hollow, now given sound and shape by Kanade's melody.

(I can feel… So I can feel, too. If that's true… then maybe, just maybe I'll be able to find it after all.)

Meanwhile...

[Yuu's POV]

A soft chime echoed from the screen, breaking the silence of Yuu's dimly lit room.

[Story Event – Imprisoned Marionette] Clear.

The words lingered for a moment before fading. Yuu leaned back in his chair, the glow from the monitor casting faint shadows across his face. He let out a long breath—part relief, part fatigue.

"…Well. That took longer than I thought," he murmured, rubbing the back of his neck. "But… I'm glad it went well."

The chair creaked quietly as he turned away from the screen, eyes drifting toward the bed behind him.

His voice lowered, almost challenging.

"Now then... Why don't you say something, too?"

There was a figure sitting on the edge of the mattress, waiting in perfect stillness, like a painting come to life.

The soft light from the monitor barely reached them, but it was enough.

Same hair.

Same face.

The one who had sent him into this world.

"Well, well, this is a surprise…"

Yuu narrowed his eyes.

The god leaned forward, his grin widening, like he already knew how this would end.

Chapter 37: When the Curtain Finally Rises (Volume 1 Final)

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

"Now then…" Yuu's voice cut through the silence as he turned to face the figure seated calmly on his bed. "Why don't you say something, too?"

The figure smiled—a twisted, knowing grin that mirrored Yuu's own face too perfectly.

"Well, well," he said, his tone eerily smooth and identical. "This is a surprise…"

Yuu didn't blink. His eyes narrowed. "I didn't expect you here."

The god—his god, the one who had pulled him into this strange existence—did not move. He simply sat there, legs crossed, the pale light from the window casting uncanny shadows across his familiar face.

"You cleared the event, You helped Mafuyu confront herself. You changed the outcome."

Yuu rose slowly from his chair. "That wasn't part of your plan, was it?"

"Of course it was, "It's a great scenario. Full of tension, pain, growth—deliciously unpredictable. And I'm sure you have plenty of questions. But before that…"

He snapped his fingers.

In an instant, the world shattered and reshaped itself around them.

The four walls of Yuu's bedroom peeled away into nothingness, the floor beneath his feet dissolved, and a cool wind swept past his face as he blinked—

—and found himself standing on the rooftop of Kamiyama High.

The familiar school fence swayed lightly in the breeze.

The sky above was an unnatural twilight, painted in tones of dusk and dawn at once.

"Let's head back to the rooftop, shall we?" the god said, voice rich with mischief. "I always liked this place. A good setting for a turning point."

Yuu said nothing at first. He was used to the surreal by now, but the presence of his other self, here, in the real world, was something else entirely.

Still, his gaze didn't waver.

"This event," the god mused aloud, strolling toward the edge of the rooftop with his hands in his pockets, "what was it again? Ah, yes—Kamiyama High Festival."

He glanced over his shoulder, eyes glittering with a cruel glint.

“This is where Mizuki Akiyama and Rui Kamishiro talked about themselves,” the god said, stepping leisurely to the edge of the rooftop, hands clasped behind his back.

The wind tousled his identical hair, Yuu's hair. “A quiet moment under the clouds. Vulnerability laid bare. Do you remember?”

Yuu didn’t answer.

“Mizuki Akiyama…” the god continued, turning his head just slightly, as if reading the sky itself. “The one who hides behind layers of color and laughter. I believe what Mizuki fears most... is the exposure of their authentic self.”

He raised a hand toward the horizon.

“They wear a mask around others. Vibrant, loud, unshakable—until the silence comes. Mizuki is terrified, you know... terrified that if they ever show their true self, no one will accept them. That they’ll be called too weird, too much. Cast out.”

Yuu’s brow furrowed. “What about it?”

The god’s eyes twinkled with amusement. “Oh, don’t interrupt. I’m on a roll.”

He tilted his head back, gazing at the surreal sky above, colors swirling like melting paint. “Ahh, right… You were there, weren’t you?” His grin widened, “That’s right. You were watching from the shadows. The one who keeps popping in and out of the story. Always where you don’t belong.”

The clouds churned violently overhead.

“The one who wasn’t supposed to be a character, and yet… acted like you belonged.”

Yuu took a step forward, expression unreadable.

The god laughed softly. “Do you really think you haven’t changed anything? Every little word. Every glance. Every time you stood beside them when you shouldn’t have… You’ve rewritten the script in ways even I didn’t foresee.”

“I may have interfered…” Yuu muttered, his voice low but firm. “But the story still continues.”

The god gave a lilting laugh, hands spread in mock surprise. “Aha?~ Really now? So you think rewriting the script, twisting the threads of fate, and poking your nose into stories not meant for you is fun?"

“What do you want me to do then? Sit back and do nothing?”

“Exactly!” the god snapped, smile widening into something venomous. “You’re a variable. A bug. An NPC who got too self-aware. You were never supposed to intervene. You were supposed to just fade into the background!”

A gust of wind howled across the rooftop.

Yuu’s fists clenched. “And whose fault do you think that is?”

The god paused.

“I didn’t want to be here,” Yuu continued, voice trembling with held-in frustration. “You threw me into this world. And now you’re blaming me for what I’ve done?”

There was a long silence.

Then the god shrugged. “Well… I won’t really blame you. After all…” He leaned in, whispering with a glimmer of mischief. “Someone above me seems to be enjoying the little scenario you’re creating.”

Yuu’s eyes narrowed. “Someone… above you?”

The god’s grin deepened. “Now then~ As a reward for your little show, I’ll give you something special. You get five questions. I will answer each one with complete honesty and the full scope of my knowledge.”

"...Strings attached?”

“Nope~ You made the one above very happy. So this is your prize.”

The wind died down.

Even the clouds seemed to be still.

Yuu stared at him in silence.

Five questions.

Five chances.

And one wrong move could tip everything.

Yuu drew a breath, steadying himself. The rooftop wind rustled through his hair, tugging at the hem of his uniform.

"...Who are you?"

The god blinked.

Then pouted.

“Oh? That’s your first question?” He gave a theatrical sigh, slumping slightly. “Honestly... I’m disappointed.”

He snapped his fingers.

The air shimmered.

No, it ripped like a heat haze, and the illusion of his appearance began to peel away. Gone was the face that mirrored Yuu’s.

In its place—

A figure now stood before him, draped in a sleek black suit.

Blue fire licked around the edges of his silhouette like it was alive, but made no sound.

His face was off.

Comically derpy, like a poorly drawn cartoon, but something in the way his head tilted, in the way his glowing eyes held Yuu's gaze, betrayed a gravity that chilled the air.

Behind that strange mask was something serious.

"I am," he said, voice now layered and echoing unnaturally, "an Agent from Above. I am the Narrator… and the Observer."

Yuu stared, his mouth slightly parted. "Narrator and Observer, huh..."

The blue flame was grinning. "Surprise?"

"Four more~"

Yuu narrowed his eyes, then took a slow, deep breath. He clenched his fists at his sides, grounding himself.

"…Why did you send me here?"

The figure let out a delighted hum.

"Hmmm~ That's a good question!" he clapped once, a soft snap echoing strangely across the rooftop. "At least now you're starting to think like someone with a role."

He spun on one foot, looking out over the simulated cityscape beyond the rails. "Why Project SEKAI…? Well~ this place is ideal for a story like yours. It's filled with emotions, regrets, identities struggling to be understood… A digital world built entirely on the weight of the human heart."

He turned to Yuu, his blue flames flickering brighter.

"Tell me—if you were dropped into a world of war, would you have grown this way? If you were dropped into a world of peace, would you have cared at all?"

"You were placed here because this is a stage. The stage. A place where dormant hearts are tested, and illusions breathe."

Yuu stared at him, throat dry. "So I'm just… what? A character you picked for a story?"

Yuu stared at him, his voice low. "So I'm just… what? A character you picked for a story?"

"Yep! Honestly, the one above me? Super bored. Just wanted something interesting to watch, so he gave me an order. Said, 'Do something new… or I'll delete you.'" He mimed a throat-cutting gesture with a grin.

Yuu's expression twisted in disbelief. "What kind of— That's a bullshit reason!"

"What are you talking about?" the god replied with a lazy shrug, blue fire crackling faintly around his suit sleeves. "Aren't you enjoying your life in this world?"

Yuu gritted his teeth, jaw tense.

The truth was… he didn't know how to answer that.

"Then…" he muttered, "my third question."

He closed his eyes for a moment, gathering the question carefully in his mind.

"…Was the Non-existent SEKAI created through my feelings?"

The being's expression lit up as he clapped once, echoing unnaturally against the rooftop.

"Very sharp~!" he chimed. "That's right! You're quite the lore enthusiast when it comes to Project SEKAI, huh?"

Yuu's breath hitched. He'd guessed… but hearing it confirmed twisted something deep in his gut.

"That space, the one beyond the limits of the game, where glitchless Miku first appeared—that's your doing. You made it. You birthed it. A void born not of code, but of longing. Loneliness. Doubt. A need to escape the world you tried so hard to understand."

He straightened, voice now chillingly calm.

"And that… was when the stage truly began."

(I see... So it was my fault all along...)

The thought echoed in Yuu's mind like a stone sinking into deep water, dragging the surface calm into ripples.

He clenched his fists.

The Non-existent SEKAI… the glitch… Miku's sadness… was all that really his fault?

The being in front of him chuckled, tipping his head like a puppet whose strings danced to unseen hands.

"Now, now, Enough with that reaction. You'll make me tear up~"

He leaned forward again, eyes narrowing with faux sympathy.

"Come on~ Ask it. Your fourth question."

Yuu exhaled shakily, steadying his voice. "Fine…"

He locked eyes with the being, gaze unwavering.

"My fourth question…"

He paused, voice turning sharper.

"Did you manipulate the other characters to follow a fixed path... even after I changed the story?"

The flames stilled.

For a moment, the being didn't smile.

A flicker of something unreadable passed through his eyes.

"Well, well," he murmured, tone softer now. "You really are asking the right questions."

He turned his back, walking slowly toward the rooftop fence as if giving the moment weight.

"I didn't need to manipulate them, but soon I might have to because the one above me wants to spice things up... After all their emotions were already written. Etched into the walls of their hearts. All I had to do was… press play."

"What... What are you talking about?"

"For example? What would happen if... one of the characters died? That would spice everything up right?"

Yuu's breath caught in his throat.

"…What?"

The being's voice dropped to a low hum, almost melodic. "I mean, come on. You've already broken so many things, little variable. Story flags, scene triggers, character arcs. Don't you think the world deserves a bit of drama in return?"

He spun around, arms raised like a conductor before an orchestra of chaos.

"Just imagine it!" he crooned, flames curling higher behind him. "An idol disappears. A best friend vanishes. Someone falls from this very rooftop. Ahh~ The tragedy! The questions! The tears!"

Yuu took a step forward. "Don't mess with them."

"Mess?" the being repeated, tilting his head. "You're the one who did that first. You interfered. You touched every story like a player slamming buttons on a broken controller. All I'm doing is… adjusting the difficulty."

"You said this was a reward."

"It is," the god replied, grinning widely. "The reward of knowing how powerless you really are."

Yuu's fists trembled at his sides.

"If you hurt any of them—"

"You'll what?" the being whispered, suddenly inches from Yuu's face, breath cold as frost and hot as fire all at once. "Fight me? Break the script again? Maybe you'll even try to become the protagonist of this story, hmm?"

He laughed—a hollow, unhinged sound.

"Well, go on, then!" he shouted, throwing his arms out. "Ask your fifth and final question, Yuu Hazuki! Let's end this season with a bang!"

The wind howled across the rooftop.

Yuu stared, heart pounding.

And then… he opened his mouth.

"Then... my final question."

The rooftop wind carried Yuu's words like a blade through the stillness.

Across from him, the Agent's grin widened. "I see~ I see~ Go on!"

Yuu's gaze didn't waver.

"Is it possible to make a bet... with the one above you?"

For the first time, the Agent flinched.

It was subtle, but undeniable. His eyes, once playfully lidded and filled with mocking glee, widened ever so slightly.

The air itself seemed to hold its breath. The ever-burning blue flames dancing along his suit sleeves dimmed, flickering with unease.

"...What did you say?"

"You said the one above you is watching this, that they're enjoying the story. Then if they're really just that, an audience, maybe, they'd be interested in a gamble."

The silence that followed was oppressive.

The sky above no longer shimmered with code.

It had gone flat, matte, like someone had pulled the curtain back and revealed an empty stage.

The Agent stood perfectly still, more puppet than man now, strings trembling in a wind no one could see.

"You... You don't understand what you're asking," he said finally, voice low and brittle, like glass on the verge of shattering. "The one above me doesn't make bets. They rewrite fate. They erase variables."

"And I'm willing to take that risk."

Yuu took a single step forward.

"I don't want to be just a variable anymore. I want to fight for the others. Not just play inside someone else's game."

The Agent stared.

For a long moment, he didn't breathe.

Then slowly, a grin spread across his face, no longer playful, no longer derpy or mocking.

This smile was something else.

Too wide.

Too sharp.

A little mad.

"...You really are broken," he whispered.

He raised his hand.

And with a SNAP—

BOOM.

The sky tore open.

A chasm of light and glitch split the heavens, and from it poured code like shattered glass,

Gravity itself bent under the weight of something greater.

The Agent laughed, a wild, unhinged laugh that echoed through the hollowed world.

"A bet, is it?! Very well!!"

He spun on his heel, arms flung wide, gesturing to the void beyond the broken sky.

“Can you hear that, O Watcher of Worlds?! This boy wants a seat at the table! Will you let him play?!”

Then—

Everything stopped.

The glitch froze in place like a paused animation. Not a single fragment moved. Not a whisper stirred the air.

And then—

A soft chime.

A holographic interface flickered into existence before Yuu, suspended in front of him like a judgment made manifest.

[What are you willing to bet?]

Yuu didn’t answer right away.

He closed his eyes.

Let the silence swallow him.

He thought of everyone in Project Sekai.

He thought of his family.

He thought of himself.

Of a world that never should’ve existed in his reality... and yet he did.

He opened his eyes.

They were calm.

Clear.

Unshakable.

“My existence."

The words struck like thunder.

Even the Agent flinched.

"...Oho~?" His voice cracked, the grin faltering for the first time since the beginning. "You’d really risk that?"

Yuu didn’t answer.

He didn’t have to.

Because for the first time since arriving in this broken world—

He wasn’t afraid.

After all…

“I’m the protagonist.”

[TO BE CONTINUED]

Chapter End Notes

HEY GUYS! IT'S ME, EXITCUE!

Thank you so much for joining me in this short journey of "Beyond the Stage" Project Sekai FANFIC

First of all, there is something I need to explain!

I thought that my readers were not real since there are only a few readers commenting and suggesting

"Beyond the Stage" Project Sekai Fanfic isn't DONE, there are still more chapters I have plans on! (No one suggested to me nor pressured me)

That's why I remember breaking a sweat when I saw a few readers reading this story... In fact that this series reached 100k Words (IKR Insane)
For the same reasons, I also removed any sections that were unnecessary or untangled (since I don't know how to cook those parts, so I just stuck with the best ones)

Actually, I tried to extend the storylines from the other groups, but I think my mind wandered. (I got the wrong recipe.)

Also, did you guys know that this story was inspired by a few manhwa? (Webtoon Na Kang Lim, The Novel's Extra, The Extra's Academy Survival Guide)

Anyways! THANK YOU GUYS! SEE YOU PROBABLY AROUND NEXT YEAR! (jk)

Chapter 38: Author Chapter

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

Hello everyone! ExitCue here, I'm just posting this here for... information since I'm gonna continue the volume 2/season 2 (Whatever you call it) next week! This is an informational chapter about Yuu Hazuki!

Background

Hazuki Yuu was an ordinary third-year college student majoring in Biology. At 20 years old, his days revolved around lectures, lab reports, sleepless nights of studying, and rushed breakfasts from the nearest konbini. He was just another face in the crowd—until the world changed.

One moment, he was a tired student playing Project SEKAI to unwind. Next, he found himself pulled into the very game world, unable to log out or return to reality.

Appearance
Original (Before Entry)
As a college student, Yuu had the tired, overworked look of someone constantly on the edge of burnout. He had messy black hair that always refused to stay combed, and weary eyes shadowed with dark bags from too many sleepless nights. Most days he wore his university's lab coat over a casual button-down and slacks, blending into the crowd of science majors with his unassuming presence.

Current (Inside Project SEKAI)
Inside the game world, Yuu's physical form reverted to that of his 17-year-old self. His hair remains a tousled, unkempt black, but his face is softer now, free from the fatigue that once marked his features. Though younger in body, the quiet seriousness in his eyes often betrays the years he's truly lived—and the weight he now carries.

Etymology
Yuu (優) – A common Japanese given name that can mean "gentle," "superior," or "excellent," depending on the kanji. It reflects Yuu's calm demeanor, emotional resilience, and hidden strength that emerges as the story progresses.

Hazuki (葉月) – The traditional Japanese name for the month of August, meaning "leaf month." The name carries a melancholic, transitional atmosphere, symbolic of Yuu's quiet personality and the seasonal shift his journey brings to the world around him.

Relationships
Glitching Miku
The first Virtual Singer Yuu encounters in the Non-existent SEKAI. Isolated and fading, she initially appears more doll than human. But when Yuu finds her, something awakens in both of them. He promises to save her alongside other Virtual Singers, not just as a player, but as a performer and companion. Her sadness becomes his turning point, and she becomes the one constant in a world that keeps shifting.

An Shiraishi
One of the first members of Vivid BAD SQUAD to notice Yuu's existence. An is lively and empathetic, and her open curiosity gradually draws Yuu out of his shell. She invites him to WEEKEND GARAGE, encouraging his first real steps into the game's social circle. Their relationship grows into a warm friendship built on shared passion for music and a mutual desire to protect what matters.

Toya Aoyagi
Quiet and composed, Toya sees through Yuu's background-character act early on. The two share a quiet understanding; neither one says much, but both can read the emotions behind silences. Over time, Toya becomes someone Yuu trusts for clear-headed advice, and their shared sense of responsibility for others forms the core of their bond.

Akito Shinonome
At first dismissive of Yuu, Akito is the most skeptical member of the group. But after seeing Yuu's determination firsthand, he begins to respect him in his own tsundere-like way. Their banter often masks a growing camaraderie, Yuu's presence subtly softens Akito's rough edges.

Kohane Azusawa
Kohane is gentle, but observant. She quickly picks up on Yuu's uncertainty, offering him quiet support even when he doesn't ask for it. Yuu admires her growth and perseverance, often seeing parts of his own struggles mirrored in hers. They develop a mutual respect grounded in empathy and quiet strength.

Hoshino Ichika
The girl who calls Yuu the "protagonist" beyond the stage. Ichika is the first person to suggest that Yuu's presence might be something more than a coincidence. Their connection is marked by shared introspection and questions about what lies beyond the SEKAI.

Hanasato Minori
Yuu first encountered Minori through Kohane. Her bright personality and boundless optimism initially caught him off guard, but he quickly found comfort in her energy. Her warmth helped draw him into the orbit of MORE MORE JUMP!, and Yuu, in turn, offered her the kind of quiet support she never knew she needed: someone who listens without trying to fix her.

Kiritani Haruka
Haruka didn't trust Yuu at first.

As a former top idol with years of experience in the public eye, she saw his vague background, awkward silences, and unclear motives as potential red flags. Their first meeting in the Stage SEKAI was tense, Haruka holding herself stiffly, Yuu unsure how to respond.

But as time passed, she noticed something genuine in the way he handled people: quiet care, steady support, and a willingness to step back rather than steal the spotlight. When Yuu officially became a temporary manager for MORE MORE JUMP!, Haruka began to open up. Though she rarely says it aloud, she now values his presence and trusts his judgment, especially when she finds herself doubting her own.

Hatsune Miku: VIRTUAL SINGER and friend.

Kagamine Rin: VIRTUAL SINGER and friend.

Kagamine Len: VIRTUAL SINGER and friend.

Megurine Luka: VIRTUAL SINGER and friend.

MEIKO: VIRTUAL SINGER and friend.

KAITO: VIRTUAL SINGER and friend.

Chapter End Notes

More information here will be updated in further chapters.

Chapter 39: Where the Story Begins Again (Volume 2 Start)

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

Yuu stirred.

His fingers twitched against the edge of a wooden desk, and his forehead slipped off the cool surface with a dull thud. A sharp breath left his lips as he blinked blearily, disoriented.

"...Huh?"

He sat up slowly, rubbing his eyes.

The white ceiling, the faint ticking of a clock, the shelves lined with biology textbooks, all unmistakably familiar.

“…I’m in my room?”

It was the same cramped space from before, slightly messy, comfortingly ordinary.

The blanket on his bed was crumpled.

A convenience store bag lay crumpled by the trash can, half-finished sandwich inside.

Everything was back to how it used to be.

Except—

A faint electronic chime rang in the air, followed by a flicker of light.

In front of him, a holographic UI blinked to life. Its soft blue glow illuminated his face.

[A new version of Project SEKAI is available. Please update to continue.]

“…Heh.”

Yuu stared at it, something between a smirk and a sigh slipping from his lips.

“I see.”

His finger hovered over the prompt.

He didn’t hesitate.

Click.

The update began instantly, the progress bar sweeping across the screen with pixelated precision.

But Yuu didn’t watch it.

His eyes drifted instead to the window, where sunlight poured in, warm and golden.

Outside, the world moved on.

Normal.

Peaceful.

“I made a bet with the system,” Yuu muttered under his breath, eyes still fixed on the flickering hologram. “And now I don’t know what’s going to happen…”

Just then, his phone buzzed harshly against the wood of his desk.

He blinked, glancing over.

A familiar name lit up the screen.

“…Ah, I forgot.”

He swiped to accept the call and brought it to his ear.

“Hazuki-kun?” a voice said sweetly—but laced with unmistakable irritation. “Do you know what time it is?~”

Yuu winced.

It was Ayaka.

And she did not sound pleased.

“Ahh! Sorry! I’m going there right now!” he blurted, springing up from his seat like he’d just been electrocuted.

Without another word, he quickly tapped the corner of the holographic UI to shut it down.

The glowing interface flickered, then disappeared entirely. His world returned to mundane reality, clothes scattered on his chair, toothbrush cup still sitting unwashed by the sink.

He scrambled to change, tossing on a hoodie and jeans in record time, nearly tripping over his bag in the rush.

Outside, the sun was already high.

Yuu stood doubled over, panting as he caught his breath. Across from him, Ayaka watched with her arms crossed and a deceptively sweet smile stretched across her face.

“So?” she said, tilting her head. “Care to explain why you’re late? Especially on a weekend?”

“I’m sorry! Ayaka-san!” he blurted out instinctively, still gasping for air.

(I can't tell her that the gods sent my consciousness somewhere far away from this world…)

“I promise I won’t be late again!”

Ayaka let out a theatrical sigh, brushing a lock of hair behind her ear. “That’s fine… I just wanted to make sure you’re doing great. You’ve seemed a little off lately.”

“I’m great, really,” Yuu replied, straightening up and forcing a smile.

She looked at him for a second longer, as if searching for the truth in his eyes, before nodding.

“Good. Now, now… enough with this! Come help me promote the live show for the girls!”

“Yes, ma’am! Will do!”

“Ooh~ That’s the energy I like to see! Let’s go!”

“Yeah!”

“Ei ei oh!~”

“…Ohh…” Yuu chuckled softly, letting the tension melt from his shoulders.

And so, my job as an assistant manager continued—checking schedules, handing out flyers, replying to endless streams of messages, and running across the venue grounds alongside Ayaka. It was hectic, fast-paced, and borderline exhausting.

That was, until—

“Excuse me? Ayaka-san?” came a soft, familiar voice from behind.

Yuu turned on instinct.

A few steps away stood a young woman whose presence seemed to soften the very sunlight around her.

She had long, light blue hair that shimmered subtly in the summer light, catching on the breeze like silk threads dancing in the wind.

“Shizuku-sa— I mean, Shizuku,” Ayaka corrected herself quickly, offering a sheepish smile. “What’s up?”

Shizuku’s gaze shifted to Yuu as he stood beside Ayaka, clipboard in hand, still mid-task.

She offered him a warm nod, the kind that made him pause without knowing why.

Yuu returned the nod, a little more stiffly.

“Are you two busy?” Shizuku asked, her tone gentle but curious.

“Ah, well… kinda,” Ayaka replied with a chuckle, adjusting her clipboard. “We’re putting together the promotion plans for the live show next week. Just wrangling the chaos before it starts.”

“I see,” Shizuku said with a small smile. “Actually, I wanted to ask if I could take tomorrow off from practice.”

“Taking a little break?” Ayaka asked, raising a brow.

Shizuku nodded. “Yes. I’m spending the day with my little sister. It’s been a while, so I promised her.”

Ayaka didn't hesitate. "No worries. Go ahead."

"Really?" Shizuku's eyes widened slightly, pleasantly surprised. "Thank you!"

"Yeah, yeah. Just don't spoil her too much, okay?"

Shizuku laughed softly, covering her mouth with one hand. "I'll try."

Shizuku tucked a loose strand of hair behind her ear, her sundress swaying as she gave a slight bow. "Well then, I won't keep you any longer. I'll send a message to the group chat too, just in case."

Ayaka gave her a casual wave. "Sounds good. Enjoy your day tomorrow."

"Thank you," Shizuku replied, then turned to Yuu once more. "And you too, Hazuki-kun… don't work too hard, alright?"

Yuu blinked, a little caught off guard. "Ah—yeah. I'll try."

With a soft chuckle, Shizuku gave a final nod and began walking away, the light catching on her hair like ripples on a still pond.

Yuu watched her figure grow smaller in the distance until she disappeared around the corner of the venue.

Ayaka exhaled beside him, brushing her bangs back. "She's always been like that. Graceful, polite… a little air-headed sometimes, but dependable when it counts."

(Well, she does suck when it comes to electronics...)

"Hazuki-kun, you can leave early today."

Yuu looked up from the clipboard in his hands, blinking in surprise. "Huh? But I haven't finished everything yet."

Ayaka waved him off with a casual smile, one hand already sorting through the stack of promotional flyers on her desk. "I just remembered that weekends are supposed to be for resting. Imagine that."

…Are you sure?"

"I'm sure," she said, glancing up at him with a wink. "Besides, you've already taken care of most of the leftover tasks I didn't get to yesterday. I'll handle the rest."

There was a brief silence as Yuu hesitated, still unsure if she was genuinely giving him a break or testing him.

But Ayaka had already turned her attention back to the flyers, humming softly under her breath like it was no big deal.

"…Okay then," Yuu murmured, finally relenting.

He placed the clipboard neatly onto the desk, its final pages rustling gently beneath his fingers. Then, with a small bow, he said, "Thank you for today."

The late afternoon sun had already started to dip, casting golden hues along the streets as the cicadas hummed overhead. There was a quiet peace to it, like the world itself had exhaled.

As Yuu walked down the quiet sidewalk, the fading sun casting long shadows behind him, a familiar shimmer of blue light flickered in front of his eyes.

Beep.

A holographic interface suddenly materialized mid-air, just a few inches from his face.

[Update Completed.]

Yuu slowed to a stop, staring at the glowing words hovering in front of him. "…Oh. Good timing. Or just a weird coincidence."

He exhaled through his nose and gave a slight shake of his head before continuing on, the hologram gently fading as he resumed his walk home.

[Time skip – Hazuki Residence]

Back in his room, Yuu shut the door with a soft click, turned the lock, and let out a long breath. His backpack dropped onto the floor with a muted thud, and without wasting time, he swiped a hand through the air in front of him.

The holographic UI reappeared, casting a soft glow across the darkened walls.

[You can now visit the ###### SEKAI!]

Yuu tilted his head, frowning at the string of glitching symbols.

"…What's with the hashtags?"

His finger lingered over the corrupted label.

[###### SEKAI]

The glitched-out name shimmered erratically, pulsing like static on an old TV screen.

Something about it felt off.

Not dangerous, but uncertain.

Like stepping into a room where you weren't sure if the floor was still there.

Yuu hesitated.

"…No. Not yet."

He lowered his hand, exhaling slowly.

"Right. I should go ask the Virtual Singers for assistance."

Without another word, he shifted his hand and tapped the glowing icon beside it.

[School SEKAI]

The interface rippled like water, then the room dissolved into light.

The familiar walls of Yuu's bedroom rippled away like a mirage.

In a blink, he was standing inside a sunlit classroom, the chalkboard faintly dusted, windows wide open to the wind, desks perfectly aligned. The atmosphere carried a strange warmth, not quite real, but comforting all the same.

"Hello, Yuu!"

A voice called out cheerfully.

Yuu jumped, turning quickly. "Miku… Don't startle me like that—I just got here…"

Standing before him was Miku in her School SEKAI attire, hands clasped behind her back, beaming with childlike delight.

"Hehe~ Sorry! I couldn't help it!" she giggled, rocking on her heels.

From behind the rows of desks, another figure stepped into view—MEIKO, her arms crossed and expression calm, if a little amused.

"Geez… Miku, you sure are excited to see him, huh," she remarked, her tone laced with fond exasperation. "Let the poor boy catch his breath."

"Poor boy, huh…"

Yuu gave a light chuckle, rubbing the back of his neck as he stepped further into the classroom.

Miku tilted her head, hands still behind her back. "Anyway, how are you, Yuu? It's been a while since you visited this SEKAI!"

"I'm doing… so-so, I guess."

"So-so?" Miku echoed, her brow furrowing.

"It means he's half fine, half not," MEIKO replied with a knowing smile as she stepped forward. "Hello again. I'm sure you've met the MEIKO from Street SEKAI, right?"

"Yeah, I did," Yuu nodded, though his voice held a hint of confusion. "I was just… wondering how you know about the MEIKO from that SEKAI."

MEIKO raised an eyebrow. "Huh? Didn't Miku already explain this?"

"She didn't," Yuu deadpanned.

Miku blinked. "I didn't? Ah! You're right—I didn't!"

She twirled in place once, her long teal twintails swaying before stopping squarely in front of him. "Then let me explain!"

“It’s okay,” MEIKO said gently, glancing at Miku with a soft chuckle. “I’m sure Yuu’s already figured it out.”

Yuu scratched his cheek sheepishly. “Well… I kinda half did. All I really know is that every version of you—every Virtual Singer in each SEKAI—wants to help save the Glitching Miku from the Non-existence SEKAI.”

Miku nodded with a bright, encouraging smile. “That’s right!”

Her eyes softened a little, as if she too carried the weight of that mission.

“Speaking of…” Yuu’s tone dipped lower. “Glitching Miku. Non-existence SEKAI. Any updates?”

Miku tapped her finger to her chin, expression turning thoughtful.

“Hmm… KAITO and Luka lost connection with that SEKAI. So, they’re probably getting help from the [Wonderland SEKAI] right now.”

“I see…” Yuu murmured, the corner of his mouth tightening.

“Actually…” Yuu began, his voice steady but low, “I’m here because I have something to say. And I think… it’s better if every single Virtual Singer hears it.”

Miku blinked, tilting her head slightly. “Hm? A meeting?!”

“You… could say that.”

Her eyes lit up with a sudden gleam of determination. “Alright! MEIKO! Let’s call everyone up!”

MEIKO gave a brisk nod. “On it, Miku.”

With that, her form shimmered with a golden hue before slowly fading out, as though being pulled back into the fabric of the SEKAI itself.

[Timeskip...]

The once-familiar classroom had transformed.

Now, the walls were lined with soft panels of light, the blackboard gone and replaced with a glowing emblem of the SEKAI system.

A grand round table stood in the center, and surrounding it, the Virtual Singers of the [School SEKAI] had taken their seats, Miku, MEIKO, Luka, KAITO, Rin, and Len, each gazing toward Yuu with curious anticipation.

Yuu rubbed the back of his neck as he stood awkwardly near the center.

“Uhm… I didn’t think it would be this overdramatic,” he muttered under his breath.

Rin giggled from her seat. “What are you talking about, Yuu? School always has meeting rooms, right?” she said cheerfully, resting her chin on her palm.

“…Fair point.”

He drew in a quiet breath, looking around at the familiar faces—each one waiting patiently. Then, he raised his eyes and nodded.

“Alright. Let’s start from the beginning.”

The room hushed as Yuu began speaking. His voice was measured at first, careful and uncertain, but as he continued, it became steadier—stronger.

He explained it all.

From the first moment he encountered the Glitching Miku… to the surreal creation of the Non-existence SEKAI… to the growing distortion in the world he thought he understood.

As the truth unfolded, the room remained silent, the only sounds being the low hum of the floating lights overhead.

When he finally paused, KAITO leaned forward, brows furrowed.

“So… you’re telling me that you created the Non-existence SEKAI?”

Yuu hesitated for only a moment, then gave a small nod. “Yeah… it was born from my feelings.”

“But… why that SEKAI?” Luka asked softly, her eyes narrowing slightly. “I mean, I understand that each SEKAI is shaped by strong, unspoken emotions—but what kind of feelings would lead to something like that?”

A silence followed, heavy but not judgmental.

MEIKO broke it, arms crossed thoughtfully. “Then let me ask something else,” she said. “Why did we suddenly start calling it the Non-existence SEKAI?”

Yuu looked up, puzzled for a moment. “Huh… now that you mention it…”

He paused. The words floated around in his mind—familiar, yet distant.

“…I don’t remember naming it that. It’s just what everyone started calling it."

Just then, a voice echoed through the room—soft, calm, and resonant.

“We call it the Non-existence SEKAI… because the SEKAI isn’t finished yet.”

Everyone turned at once.

Standing just beyond the circle of light was a figure draped in stillness. Her hair, pale like frost, cascaded gently down her back, and her eyes shimmered with a quiet, melancholic glow.

Hatsune Miku.

But not the one they knew.

“The Miku from the [Empty SEKAI]…” Len breathed, his voice laced with surprise.

Before anyone could respond, another voice rang out, far more energetic and bold.

“Looks like everyone’s on board with this one!”

A bright flash of yellow darted behind KAITO, nearly startling him out of his seat.

“Hello everyone! It’s me! Kagamine Len!” the boy announced with a grin, striking a confident pose.

Rin blinked. “Ah! The Len from the [Street SEKAI]!”

And then—like ripples spreading across still water—they arrived.

One by one, the Virtual Singers from every SEKAI stepped into view, emerging through shimmering portals of light or simply appearing as if the world had decided they belonged there.

Yuu blinked, slowly turning in place as the room—once a quiet meeting—transformed into a vibrant gathering.

“Uhm… I didn’t really expect everyone to appear here,” he muttered under his breath.

“Of course we did!” Rin from [MORE MORE JUMP!] said, placing her hands on her hips with pride. “We’re all a team, right? To save the Glitching Miku!”

“We can’t just sit around and do nothing,” KAITO from [Nightcord] added, his gaze distant as he glanced out the classroom window, the light catching the edge of his glasses. “Not when we’ve seen what’s at stake.”

Luka, standing near the table with an air of quiet strength, gave Yuu a small, encouraging smile. “Well… Yuu? Looks like everyone here is going to help you finish what you’ve started.”

The voices quieted as every gaze turned toward him.

Yuu stood frozen for a moment. The weight of it all—their trust, their willingness, their hope—was overwhelming.

But he nodded.

“…Yeah.”

“But still…” KAITO from Wonderlands x Showtime frowned, crossing his arms as he glanced toward his counterpart. “Seeing myself wear such a downcast expression... it just doesn’t feel right.”

The KAITO from the [Empty SEKAI] looked away, silent.

“Hey now! KAITO of [Empty SEKAI]—cheer up!” Miku from Street SEKAI called out brightly, offering him a hand. “Why don’t you perform with us for a bit? That always lifts your mood!”

Yuu blinked as he watched the Virtual Singers from across the SEKAI exchange words—some awkward, some teasing, and others gently encouraging.

They were technically the same characters from different worlds, but now that they were face to face, the differences in their personalities stood out more vividly than ever.

Without interrupting further, Yuu quietly stepped back. The classroom faded.

In the blink of an eye, he was back in his room.

The dim lighting cast soft shadows on the walls. The hum of reality returned. And in front of him, glowing gently, was the hologram UI of Project SEKAI.

The option hovered before him:

[###### SEKAI]

The text still garbled.

Unstable.

Incomplete.

Waiting.

Yuu took a slow breath, his hand steady.

“Alright… The story begins again.”

He tapped the screen.

Chapter End Notes

I made this chapter longer because it's a special chapter! <3

Chapter 40: My Sekai

The option hovered before him:

[###### SEKAI]

The text is still garbled.

Unstable.

Incomplete.

Waiting.

Yuu took a slow breath, his hand steady.

“Alright… The story begins again.”

He tapped the screen.

The world shifted in an instant.

Yuu felt the ground tilt beneath him, weightless for a breath, before sensation returned.

His eyes fluttered open and were immediately struck by a harsh, white brilliance from above.

“Then I’ll perform,” Yuu said firmly, straightening his posture. "Pick a song."

He raised his hand and swiped at the empty air. At once, a familiar shimmer spread out before him.

The Project Sekai hologram bloomed into existence with its soft glow.

Rows of stages floated in the void, faint outlines of notes dancing across transparent lanes as if waiting to be played.

Yuu’s fingers brushed across the light, cycling through the stages.

Each flick of his wrist caused colors and titles to ripple past, fragments of melodies lingering just long enough to tug at memory.

His eyes followed the scrolling list with quiet patience, but the way he spoke carried an unwavering certainty.

“No matter what you choose… I’ll sing it. Even if your voice glitches. Even if it feels broken.”

He glanced at her, a small, sincere smile on his lips. “A song is still a song.”

The light poured down like a spotlight, so sharp and unrelenting that he instinctively raised a hand to shield his gaze.

When his vision adjusted, he found himself standing on a surface unlike any he had seen before.

Smooth, pale, and pristine, glossy like a freshly polished stage floor, stretching outward with no end in sight.

It reflected the light in soft ripples, as if the world itself was still unfinished, waiting for someone to step forward and give it form.

A quiet exhale left his lips. “I’m back… but the question is... where is she?"

The words drifted into the emptiness.

He turned slowly, his eyes scanning the horizonless stage.

“You don’t need to go far.”

The voice, gentle yet clear, came from behind him.

Yuu pivoted, and there she was.

The first figure who had ever greeted him in this place.

The one who had guided him when he was still fumbling to understand it all.

“Miku.”

This time, however, something was different.

She wasn’t wearing her usual neutral expression.

Instead, her lips curved into a smile, subtle but unmistakably warm, her hands clasped loosely behind her back as though she had been waiting for this exact moment.

“Hello,” she said softly, her teal eyes catching the light. “It seems you finally have access to this Sekai.”

“Yeah…” Yuu murmured, his voice laced with quiet relief. “Took me a while. Did you wait?”

Miku gave a small nod, her smile never fading.

The silence between them stretched, fragile and uneasy, before Yuu finally spoke.

“Oh, by the way… everyone’s trying to save you. I mean… us.”

Miku tilted her head slightly, her smile softening into curiosity. “Are you talking about… the other me’s?”

“Yeah.” His voice was low, almost burdened. “It seems this Sekai’s been glitching, and somehow, we’re trying to fix it. But…” His words faltered, hanging heavy in the air. “I was also responsible for creating this.”

The confession lingered, sharp and cold, echoing louder in the stillness than he intended.

Miku said nothing.

Her smile had faded, leaving only her clear gaze fixed on him.

Yuu’s throat tightened.

He clenched his fists before blurting out the thought that had been gnawing at him ever since.

“Why didn’t you tell me… that I was the one who created this Sekai?”

For a moment, she looked less like the untouchable figure he had first met and more like someone who understood far more than she could ever say.

“Because some truths,” she murmured, her voice gentle, “aren’t meant to be given… they’re meant to be found.”

“Found…? By me?”

“This Sekai exists because you willed it,” she said softly. “And because of that… only you can decide what it becomes.”

“But Miku… I didn’t want to create this. A glitch? Something broken?”

For a moment, silence stretched between them, heavy yet strangely tender.

Miku tilted her head, her smile faint but unwavering. “Sometimes what we create isn’t what we intend… but what we need.”

Her words flowed like a lullaby, soft enough to soothe, yet vague enough to stir unease. She stepped closer, her presence radiating warmth in the sterile white glow around them.

“Even a glitch,” she whispered, “is still a part of you. And in every broken piece… lies the proof that you exist.”

"Glitch, huh... Is it because I'm a glitch?"

“A glitch… is only a name others give to something they cannot understand.”

She reached out, her fingertips hovering just shy of his shoulder, never quite touching, as if to remind him of both closeness and distance.

“To me, you are not a glitch,” Miku continued, her smile as delicate as glass. “You are the reason this place still breathes. Imperfect, unstable, yes… but alive. That is something no error can claim.”

“I don’t want that…”

The words slipped from Yuu like a sigh, his shoulders slumping as if finally releasing a weight he had carried too long.

He stretched his arms outward, chasing away the tightness in his chest.

“By the way, Miku…” His voice steadied, though his eyes flickered with unease. “This is just a question, but… you’re my system, aren’t you?”

For a moment, silence.

He gave a small, knowing nod. “I mean… I kinda remembered. You asked me to perform, and then… You gave me a stage. A level to clear.”

Yeah.”

“So you’ve been watching me this whole time.”

Miku tilted her head slightly, the glitch in her eye flickering again. “Watching you perform with others is fun.”

“I’m glad you’re having fun." Then, with a hesitant smile, he extended his hand toward her. “But for now… how about we both perform?”

Miku’s lips parted, but no words came at first. Her silence hung in the air like a delicate thread, straining under weight unseen.

At last, she whispered, “But my voice is fractured. Glitching. And every time I move… I feel like I could fall apart.”

Yuu lowered his hand, “…I see.”

“Then I’ll perform,” Yuu said firmly, straightening his posture as if the weight of his own resolve kept him standing. “Pick a song.”

He raised his hand and swiped at the empty air. At once, a familiar shimmer spread out before him.

The Project Sekai hologram bloomed into existence with its soft glow.

Rows of stages floated in the void, faint outlines of notes dancing across transparent lanes as if waiting to be played.

Yuu’s fingers brushed across the light, cycling through the stages.

“No matter what you choose… I’ll sing it. Even if your voice glitches. Even if it feels broken.” He glanced at her, a small, sincere smile on his lips. “A song is still a song.”

“Hatsune Miku no Shoushitsu.”

Yuu’s hand froze mid-swipe. His breath hitched slightly as his eyes shifted toward her.

“...Of all the songs… why that one?”

Miku tilted her head, her glitching eye flickering with unstable static. Then, to his surprise, she let out a faint, almost mischievous laugh.

“I’m kidding…” Her voice softened, carrying warmth beneath the distortion. “My Stage With You.”

Yuu blinked. The tension in his shoulders eased as realization sank in.

“...Oh. I see.” A smile tugged at his lips. “You scared me for a second.”

Her fragmented silhouette seemed to brighten, the glitching static faintly receding. “I wanted to know if you’d hesitate… or if you’d still sing with me anyway.”

Yuu placed his hand over the glowing interface, the title of the song pulsing in gentle rhythm. “I wouldn’t hesitate. Not with you.”

Yuu pressed the stage, and the glowing interface rippled outward.

The opening notes of My Stage With You echoed faintly through the empty space, soft and fragile at firstlike a memory trying to take form.

Taking a breath, Yuu stepped forward as the holographic lights bloomed around him. His voice followed the melody, steady and earnest, filling the void.

Miku stood a few steps back, her faintly glitching body flickering in time with the music.

She watched, her mismatched eyes fixed on him, as if trying to burn the sight of him into her memory.

The last note lingered in the air, trembling faintly before dissolving into silence. Yuu let his arm fall back to his side, his chest rising and falling with measured breaths. A thin sheen of sweat glistened at his temple, catching the soft blue light of the holographic stage.

“How was it?” he asked, half-expecting only static in response.

Miku clapped her hands together—gentle, deliberate, almost fragile. “Eight hundred fifty-four combo, no miss… as expected of you.”

Yuu gave a short laugh, shaking his head. “I wasn’t really asking about the score.”

Her glitching left eye flickered once, a brief spark like fractured glass, before her expression softened. Still clapping softly, she tilted her head. “But that’s my answer. You’re amazing, Yuu.”

He smiled faintly at that, though it carried no weight of pride—just a heaviness that pressed against his chest. “…I see.”

The bright projection of the stage bled away like watercolor fading into the page, until only the two of them remained in the vast, empty void. A stillness swallowed the space, broken only by the faint hum of lingering data.

Miku’s voice came softer this time, almost like a whisper from somewhere far away.
“Songs like that… they remind me that I still exist, even if only for a little longer.”

Yuu froze at the phrasing, his breath catching. He turned toward her, the hollow glow of her form wavering slightly, as though even the act of speaking strained the code that kept her together. “…A little longer, huh.”

Her gaze met his—steady, kind, yet carrying a distance he couldn’t bridge. She smiled, faint and weightless, like it could vanish at any moment.

“Don’t look so troubled. Even a fleeting moment can shine brighter than eternity.”

The words struck deeper than he expected, and he swallowed against the lump forming in his throat. “That’s… not really comforting.”

“Isn’t it?” Miku tilted her head again. A ripple of distortion shimmered through her hair, scattering the glow of the artificial light. “When something is limited, it becomes precious. That’s why I wanted to see you perform.”

Her words left no room for dismissal. Yuu lowered his gaze, fingers curling slightly at his sides, then spoke in a voice almost too quiet for the void to carry. “…If that’s true, then I’ll keep performing. Until the end. For you.”

The glitch in Miku’s left eye sparked once more, but this time the distortion caught in a way that almost looked like it was glistening.

Her smile softened, faint yet resolute.

“Then I’ll keep listening and watching.”

The stage’s false light reflected faintly in his eyes, steady despite the hollowness around them.

Miku blinked slowly, her form flickering at the edges as if the world itself hesitated to hold her. The glitch in her eye pulsed once, catching the glow and scattering it like a tear that would never fall.

She let out a quiet breath, her lips curving into a smile that was both fragile and radiant. “That’s a promise then?”

Her voice carried no weight, yet it pressed firmly against Yuu’s chest, threading itself into the silence between them.

Yuu met her gaze and nodded, the faintest trace of warmth softening his tired expression. “…Yeah. A promise.”

For a moment, the empty stage felt less like a void and more like a place that belonged to just the two of them.

“Yuu.”

“Hm?”

Miku lifted her hand, palm open. Fractured light spilled between her fingers, glitching like broken pixels until it slowly coalesced into something solid.

A faint shimmer settled into shape, a watch.

“Wear this."

“It’s a watch, silly… a smart watch.”

“For me?” His voice caught, quiet. “…Then, thanks.”

Miku smiled faintly, placing it into his hands. “With this, you’ll be able to communicate with the other me or any of the Virtual Singers like me.”

“I see…” He fastened it around his wrist.

But her expression shifted, a shadow flickering behind her eyes. "I just have a bad feeling something's about to change, so... be careful."

“Careful about what?”

Her gaze lingered on him longer than usual, as though weighing whether to say it. Finally, her voice dropped to a whisper. “I know you’ll confront the one who sent you here.”

His eyes widened. “…You know, huh?”

“Of course.” She gave a soft, bittersweet smile. “I’m your system after all.” Then, after a pause, she asked quietly, “…Are you really willing to put yourself on the line?”

Yuu stared at Miku, her question still lingering in the air.

“Yeah… I’m confident.” A faint grin tugged at his lips as he turned away. With a flick of his hand, he swiped open the glowing interface and tapped [Go Back]. “After all… I’m the protagonist!”

Light wrapped around him, his figure breaking apart into fragments of code until he faded from the Sekai.

“…Protagonist, huh…” Miku’s voice was barely above a whisper. Her form began to dissolve, scattering into the same glitching light. Yet her eyes lingered on where he had stood only moments before.

“I see… then I’ll watch you.”

And with that, she was gone.

Chapter 41: Blocked and Bantering

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

[A day later — Shinonome Ena's perspective]

"Not enough…" Ena muttered under her breath, glaring at the unfinished sketch on her tablet. Her wrist ached from forcing the same line over and over. "Why can't I draw anything today?!"

The door slammed open.

"Oi, you're loud as hell!"

Ena whipped around. "Akito? Why the hell are you barging into my room?"

"Because you were practically yelling! Anyone could hear you down the hall," Akito shot back with an exasperated sigh.

Before he could escape, Ena stood and placed a firm hand on his shoulder, her lips curling into a mischievous smile.

"Say, Akito… do you have anything to do right now?"

"…Haa?"

"Do me a favor."

Akito frowned. "Why would I do that? I'm busy as hell."

Ena puffed her cheeks, leaning in closer as if to corner him. "Busy doing what, huh?"

"Tch—shut up! That was one time!" Akito snapped, glaring. "Unlike you, I actually have stuff to practice."

Ena crossed her arms, eyes narrowing with mock offense. "Ohhh, I see. You're saying my art doesn't matter?"

"That's not what I—ugh, you're impossible." He rubbed the back of his neck, clearly annoyed but not walking away yet.

Ena smirked. "Then it's settled. You'll help me."

"…You didn't even ask me what the favor was."

And so, the two found themselves walking side by side down the busy street, each with a cup of milk tea in hand.

The faint chatter of pedestrians mingled with the rhythmic clinking of bicycle bells.

Ena sipped hers with a satisfied hum, the straw bobbing slightly as she leaned back with a carefree grin.

“Ahh~ that hits the spot.”

Akito, on the other hand, had one hand occupied with his drink while the other scrolled absently across his phone screen.

“Can we go home now?” he muttered, not even glancing at her.

Ena tilted her head, feigning surprise. “Eh? But you’re still helping me, remember? Unless…” Her eyes glimmered with mischief as her lips curled into a sly smile. “…you want me to tell Hazuki-san about your little secrets?”

That got his attention. Akito froze mid-step, lowering his phone. “Tch. How the hell did you even get in contact with him anyway? I swear—!”

“Hehe. Mizuki gave me his LineID. And, well… we’ve been talking a lot. Especially about you.” Ena’s smirk widened, her tone dripping with satisfaction.

Akito clicked his tongue, glaring at her. “Oh? Care to tell me the details?”

“Nope~.” She turned her gaze back to her drink, swirling the ice as if the matter were settled.

His jaw tightened as he muttered under his breath. “I swear, if I see his face, I’m gonna make sure I get payback.”

Ena chuckled, eyes softening despite her grin. “But… I wasn’t expecting this, you know.” She glanced sideways at him, her voice dropping to something quieter, almost genuine. “You, making a new friend.”

(But… Mafuyu knows Hazuki Yuu, and he has access to the Empty Sekai. That’s suspicious, isn’t it? Still… since Miku trusts him, maybe I should try knowing him better?)

Ena bit the straw of her drink, her gaze flicking to the crowd beyond Akito as her thoughts tangled in circles.

Her voice slipped out casually, as if testing the waters.

“So? What’s this Yuu Hazuki like? Is he good at academics?”

Akito nearly choked on his tapioca pearls. His brows furrowed as he lowered the cup, glaring at her sideways.

"...What made you interested all of a sudden?”

Ena smirked, leaning closer as if to press the question.

“What, can’t a girl be curious? You’ve been hanging around him, right? He doesn’t look like the type who studies seriously. Or am I wrong?”

But behind her playful tone, her thoughts tightened like a knot.

(If I can figure him out first… maybe I won't feel left behind when Mafuyu's around him…)

Akito gave her a flat look, lowering his phone just enough to meet her eyes.

"Tch… Don't make it sound like I'm his babysitter or something. He's top at our school but…" Akito scratched his cheek, clearly reluctant to admit it. "He's also sharper than he lets on. Observant too."

He shoved one hand in his pocket, eyes shifting away. "But hey—why do you even care? Don't tell me you're thinking of cozying up to him or whatever."

Ena tilted her head, her expression unusually serious, as if weighing his every word.

Akito froze, eyes widening. "No way… Don't tell me you're actually interested in him?!"

"HA?! No?!" Ena nearly spit out her drink, whipping her head toward him with a scowl.

Her cheeks burned faintly, whether from embarrassment or irritation, she wasn't sure. "Why the hell would I be into some background character-looking guy like him?!"

(…But if Mafuyu trusts him, then I can't just ignore that. If he's really as sharp as Akito says, then maybe… I should figure out what his deal is.)

She quickly looked away, arms crossed tight over her chest. "I just asked. Don't get the wrong idea, idiot."

Akito raised a brow, smirking knowingly. "Sure, sure. Keep telling yourself that."

"Shut up!"

Just then, two familiar figures stepped out from the café doors.

The Shinonome siblings froze—and so did the pair on the other side.

"Akito… and—"

"Ena?!" Mizuki's voice overlapped with Yuu's, both equally startled.

Ena blinked, her eyes darting between the two. "Wait, wait, wait. What are you two doing together? Don't tell me… date?!"

Yuu stiffened on the spot, eyes widening.

"N-No, we're not!" Mizuki flailed her hands defensively, cheeks puffing up. "Geez, why do people always jump straight to that?"

Akito raised a brow, watching with open suspicion. "Then what's the story here?"

Yuu opened his mouth to answer, but the words caught in his throat. He wasn't sure how to explain Mizuki dragging him along after practice without making it sound weird.

Mizuki beat him to it. "We just happened to run into each other earlier! That's all!"

"…Outside a café?" Ena deadpanned, narrowing her eyes.

“YES!” Mizuki huffed, clearly flustered. “Ugh, what’s with this interrogation?!”

Yuu rubbed the back of his neck awkwardly. “It’s… really not what it looks like.”

[Before the present]

Yuu had been slouched on his bed, phone in one hand, the soft glow of the screen reflecting against his tired eyes as he tapped through another rhythm game stage.

The familiar beats echoed faintly through his earbuds, his fingers moving with practiced precision, until his phone suddenly buzzed with a notification.

“Hm?” He paused the game, the rhythm cut off mid-track.

A new message blinked at the top of his screen.

Mizuki-san.

Curious, Yuu swiped down and opened it.

He raised an eyebrow, thumbs moving lazily as he replied.

The typing indicator blinked almost immediately.

Yuu tilted his head.

Go together? He typed back,

The reply came within seconds.

Yuu let the words sit there for a moment. A clothing store? With Mizuki? He frowned lightly, then tapped back.

This time, the reply was longer.

Yuu exhaled through his nose, a quiet chuckle escaping despite himself.

That explanation sounded exactly right for each of them.

Almost immediately, another bubble popped up.

Yuu stared at the screen, watching Mizuki’s words flash before his eyes.

He could practically hear Mizuki’s voice in his head, cheerful and pleading at once.

He sighed, letting his phone rest against his chest for a second.

“You really love clothes, huh…” he murmured aloud before his thumbs started moving again.

The response was instant, almost too eager.

Yuu smirked slightly.

Great. Let’s meet at the mall then.

And with that, the plan was set.

[Present Day]

“I see…” Ena murmured, narrowing her eyes slightly. “So it was just for clothes, huh…”

Mizuki leaned in with a playful grin, twirling a strand of their hair. “Then what about you two? You and little brother-kun?”

“Oi—don’t call me that,” Akito shot back, stuffing his hands in his pockets with a scowl. “My sister just wanted to go out for a walk since she couldn’t draw.”

“Akito!” Ena snapped, her cheeks puffing red. “Would you shut up already?!”

Yuu tilted his head, regarding Ena with mild curiosity. His voice carried that calm, almost detached tone of his. “Ahh… is that it? Art-blocked, was it?”

Ena froze, her expression tightening at the word.

“That’s normal, isn’t it?” Mizuki tilted their head, looking over at Yuu with a light smile.

Their tone was casual, almost teasing, but their eyes flicked curiously between him and Ena.

Yuu slipped his hands into his pockets, meeting Mizuki’s gaze with an unreadable calm. “Depends,” he said simply. “Normal doesn’t make it easier.”

Ena’s lips parted as if to argue, but the words caught in her throat.

Her pride wanted to push back, to deny it, yet the reminder of her empty sketchbook pages pressed down on her like a weight she couldn’t shake.

Akito, noticing her silence, frowned and shifted uncomfortably. “…You don’t gotta put it that way,” he muttered, more protective than annoyed this time.

“Hm? How about this, Shinonome-san…” Yuu spoke lightly as he pulled out his phone, his thumbs flicking across the screen with practiced ease. “I’ll send you a few images. Maybe they’ll help.”

Ena’s phone buzzed, and she tapped it open. Akito leaned in out of habit, curious, only for Ena to immediately raise her arm to block him.

Her glare was sharp enough to make him recoil with an annoyed click of his tongue.

“…Huh?” Ena blinked at the first picture. “This is… Mizuki?”

“Yep,” Yuu replied, sounding almost too casual about it. “While Mizuki and I were looking for clothing references, Mizuki tried some on and asked me to take pictures.”

“Ahh! Good thinking, Yuu-kun!” Mizuki clapped their hands together with a grin, their eyes sparkling with amusement at Ena’s expression. “With this, Ena-chan should get a few fresh ideas!”

Ena scrolled through, her brow furrowed in thought. “These are… traditional outfits?” The intricate patterns and flowing fabric stirred something in her; her artist’s block loosened just a little.

“Well?” Yuu tilted his head, watching her carefully. “Anything coming to mind?”

A faint spark lit in Ena’s eyes. “Yeah… actually, yeah!”

Akito folded his arms, smirking. “Good for you, huh.” But then, as if remembering something crucial, his grin faltered. He stepped forward, planting both hands firmly on Yuu’s shoulders. His gaze sharpened, protective, almost intimidating.

“…By the way, Hazuki-kun,” Akito said, voice low but edged. “You’re not saying anything weird to my sister behind my back, are you?”

Yuu froze. A dry laugh escaped him, thin and unconvincing. “O-Oh… ahaha… ahahaha…”

And with that, Mizuki and Yuu drifted off in one direction while the Shinonome siblings took the familiar road back home, their voices fading into the bustle of the evening crowd.

Back in her room, Ena shut the door with a quiet thud, tossing her bag aside before sinking into the worn cushion of her chair.

Her desk lamp hummed faintly as the glow of her pen tablet flickered to life.

She pulled her stylus close, shoulders already leaning forward, her eyes sharpening with that restless spark that only came when an idea finally refused to let go.

The room fell silent except for the faint scratch of stylus against screen.

She lost herself in the rhythm of sketching lines, erasing, and redrawing, her mind’s eye replaying fragments of reference photos, Mizuki’s poses, and the flashes of color that Yuu had sent her earlier.

The world outside dimmed into nothing, time blurred, slipping from her awareness as easily as water running between her fingers.

When at last she leaned back, stretching out her cramped shoulders, a soft groan escaped her lips.

She blinked, noticing the windowpane reflected nothing but her own weary face against the black canvas of night.

“…It’s night already? I didn’t even notice…” she murmured, brushing a stray strand of hair behind her ear as the realization settled in.

She reached for her phone, the glow of the screen spilling over her desk as her fingers hovered uncertainly before typing.

For a moment, nothing. Then the indicator popped up—seen. The dots pulsed. Typing…

Her lips twitched faintly. She typed back quickly, almost before she could think.

Ena glanced at the illustration still glowing on her pen tablet, the colors vivid against the darkness of her room. Her shoulders softened as she tapped her reply.

The response came almost instantly.

Ena set her phone down for a second, staring at the words.

She shook her head, muttering, “Idiot,” under her breath, though she couldn’t quite wipe the small smile off her lips.

Ena tapped the words quickly, almost too quickly, then held her breath.

The reply came after a moment:

She frowned, thumb hovering. Then, with a small huff, she typed back:

There was a pause, longer this time, before the next message appeared.

Ena stared at the screen, lips pressing together, until a quiet scoff slipped out. She set the phone face down on her desk and leaned back in her chair.

“…What a weirdo,” she muttered, though the corners of her mouth betrayed her with the faintest upward curl.

Chapter End Notes

How do you get a co-writer/co-creator?

Chapter 42: Full Court Surprise

[Around Lunch Time]

The corridors of Kamiyama High bustled with chatter, footsteps echoing against polished floors as students drifted toward the cafeteria.

Among the crowd, Toya, An, and Yuu strolled at an easy pace, their conversation carrying above the din.

“Hey, Toya,” An suddenly piped up, tilting her head as she walked backward to face them, “how tall are you, anyway?”

Toya blinked, caught off guard by the casual question. “Hm? I’m around 5'11."

“Five-eleven, huh…?” An repeated under her breath, before her eyes slid to Yuu. “What about you?”

Yuu shifted awkwardly, rubbing the back of his neck. “Erm… 5'8, I think?"

“Seriously?!”

“What?”

An groaned dramatically, “Ugh, I’m so jealous of tall people…”

That made both Toya and Yuu glance at each other in confusion before echoing in near-perfect sync: “You are?”

“Yeah!” she said, puffing out her cheeks like it was the most obvious thing in the world. “Especially since I play basketball. Height is everything in that sport, you know? And—” she jabbed a finger toward the air as though making her case in court, “our kitchen shelves at home are all made with my dad’s ridiculous height in mind. Half the stuff’s impossible for me to reach unless I climb onto a stool.”

Yuu fought back a chuckle while Toya allowed himself a small smile.

“Man, why didn’t I grow up tall like you two?” An sighed in defeat. “I bet you guys have it great.”

But Toya shook his head. “No, that’s not entirely true.”

“Huh? Really?”

“Yes,” he replied evenly. “For example… I keep running into those hanging straps on the train. Those hurt quite a bit, you know?” His calm expression didn’t falter, but the memory alone made him rub his shoulder as though he could still feel the sting.

An blinked, then laughed awkwardly. “Oh… okay. Yeah, that does sound unpleasant.”

Yuu nodded with sympathy. “It’s true. The taller you are, the more the world feels like it’s out to trip you up.”

An frowned, still unconvinced, and turned her eyes back to Yuu. “What about you then, Yuu? Is being tall hard for you, too?”

“Well…”

His eyes shifted upward, as if searching for an answer written somewhere on the ceiling.

He wasn’t particularly tall, at least not compared to Toya, but not short either.

Just somewhere in between.

Still, An’s question made him pause.

Is there really anything difficult about it?

“…I guess,” he murmured at last, tilting his head slightly. “Sometimes people expect more from you if you’re taller. Like in sports, or even just reaching things for them. It feels weird when you can’t live up to that expectation.”

His lips curved into a small, almost self-conscious smile. “Oh, and bumping my head on low door frames? That’s happened more times than I’d like to admit.”

Toya chuckled softly beside him, while An blinked before bursting out laughing.

(Why the hell are you chuckling?)

“See?! Even average height has its own problems! So it’s not like you two have it any easier than me.”

“You said you played basketball, right?” Yuu asked, glancing at An.

“Yeah.” An nodded with a grin, resting her hands behind her head.

“I kinda want to try,"

Toya raised a brow, his voice quiet but curious.

“Are you good at sports, Yuu-kun?”

Yuu blinked, pausing for a moment before answering.

“…Not really. I mean, I’ve played here and there, but I wouldn’t say I’m good.” He rubbed the back of his neck, smiling faintly as if to downplay it. “I just thought it’d be fun. That’s all.”

An’s grin widened, a spark lighting up in her eyes. “Well then, we have to play together sometime! Don’t worry, I’ll teach you the basics.”

Yuu chuckled at her enthusiasm.

Toya, though, gave a small, thoughtful nod. “It might be interesting to see. You pick things up quickly when you focus.”

The bell’s sharp chime echoed through the classroom, signaling the end of another day.

A ripple of movement followed as chairs scraped across the polished floor and voices mingled in the air, laughter, hurried footsteps, rustles of bags being packed.

Yuu, however, remained seated at his desk, fingers drumming absently against the cover of his notebook.

His gaze drifted toward the fading sunlight spilling through the windows, painting the room in warm hues.

Around him, the classroom gradually thinned out until only a handful of students were left.

Beside him, Toya quietly slid his phone from his pocket, his expression as unreadable as ever.

A soft vibration buzzed in his hand, and he glanced down at the screen before lifting his calm, steady eyes toward Yuu.

“Yuu,” he said evenly, voice breaking through the hum of distant chatter, “An wants us to head to the gym.”

Yuu blinked, caught off guard. “Huh? Wait… we’re playing already?”

Toya gave a small nod, his dark blue hair catching a sliver of light as he tilted his head. “Seems like it. Akito’s already there.”

Yuu sighed, though there was a faint smile tugging at his lips. “Hmm… Alright then.”

He shoved his notebook into his bag and swung it over his shoulder, the weight landing against his hip with a muted thud.

Rising to his feet, he stretched his arms briefly, feeling the stiffness from sitting all day ease out of his muscles.

Toya stood as well, moving with an unhurried grace.

As they stepped out into the corridor, the sound of their shoes tapping lightly against the linoleum echoed in the now-empty hall.

“Do you even have gym shoes?” Toya asked suddenly, casting a sidelong glance at Yuu.

"They're in my locker."

“Good. Let’s not keep them waiting.”

The two made their way to the locker room, the rhythmic squeak of their indoor shoes accompanying them.

There, they swapped out their neatly pressed Kamiyama High uniforms for loose gym attire at the restroom, the cotton fabric soft and cool against their skin.

Yuu tugged at his shirt hem absentmindedly before lacing up his sneakers, the faint smell of varnished wood and resin wafting in from the gym beyond.

“Aoyagi-kun, go on ahead,” Yuu said as they reached the corner near the restroom.

Toya paused mid-step, tilting his head slightly. “What’s wrong?”

“Restroom."

Toya gave a simple nod and continued down the hallway, his footsteps fading as he headed toward the gym.

Yuu waited a few moments, making sure Toya was well out of sight before exhaling a quiet sigh.

Slipping into a stall, Yuu closed the door behind him and sat down, lowering his voice to a whisper.

“Alright…”

He raised his hand and swiped the air in front of him.

A faint blue shimmer flickered into existence, revealing the translucent system interface only he could see.

“This feels like cheating,” Yuu admitted under his breath, a wry smile tugging at his lips. “But… I’ll just unlock the ones that keep me standing.”

His finger hovered briefly, then tapped decisively. familiar menu unfolded like layers of glass, glowing softly against the dim, sterile walls of the restroom.

“[Skill Tree],” he muttered, selecting the option with a tap.

Branches of icons bloomed outward across the screen like veins of light.

[Stamina to Spare] unlocked.

[Concentration] unlocked.

[Deep Breaths] unlocked.

The glowing notifications faded one by one, their light dissolving into the stale bathroom air.

Yuu let out a slow breath, almost as if releasing the tension that had clung to his chest since morning.

“There,” he muttered under his breath, the words barely louder than the hum of the flickering fluorescent light above. “I’m ready.”

He swiped through the lingering shimmer with a practiced motion, and the interface vanished.

Gripping the edge of the stall door, he pushed it open and stepped out, his reflection catching briefly in the speckled mirror.

The muffled rhythm of bouncing balls grew louder as Yuu pushed open the gym doors.

Inside, the court gleamed under the harsh fluorescent lights, lines stark against the wooden floor.

An was near the three-point arc, casually dribbling as if the ball were an extension of her hand.

She launched a shot with effortless grace, the ball spun and kissed the rim before dropping cleanly through the net.

“Nice one!” Akito called, snagging the rebound as it bounced back toward him.

Toya moved with calm precision, his focus unwavering as he sank another shot from mid-range without breaking stride.

Yuu stepped inside, the heavy door thudding shut behind him.

The sound drew their attention.

"Yuu-kun!" An waved with a grin, her energy practically radiating across the court. “Finally! Thought you ditched us.”

Akito smirked, tossing the ball lightly in one hand before spinning it on his finger. "Took you long enough."

Yuu forced a small smile, His legs felt light, his breathing steady. For the first time, he wasn’t worried about collapsing after five minutes.

“Yeah,” he said, dropping his bag by the wall. His voice was calm, but inside he felt the faint thrum of something new—something that almost felt like confidence.

“I’m ready.”

The round began.

Two-on-two.

Akito and Toya on one side.

Yuu and An on the other.

The ball struck the polished gym floor with a sharp thud, echoing against the high walls as Toya dribbled forward.

His movements were fluid, controlled elegance mixed with precision, each bounce smooth, each step deliberate.

Across from him, Yuu sank slightly lower into his stance, knees bent, arms stretched wide.

The wooden floor pressed cool against the soles of his sneakers, grounding him as his pulse thrummed like a muted drum in his ears.

“Don’t let them score first, Yuu!” An’s voice cut through the echo of bouncing rubber, carrying an edge of determination that made his grip tighten on air.

Toya’s amber eyes locked onto him, reading, calculating.

Then, motion.

A swift feint left, sharp enough to bite, followed by a seamless pivot right.

Toya was gone in a blink, his footwork so crisp it almost looked rehearsed.

Yuu's muscles snapped into action. Instinct overthought. Reflex over hesitation.

(Focus… anticipate…)

[Concentration activated.]

And then it clicked.

The rhythm.

Every bounce of the ball pulsed like a beat in his head. Every shuffle of sneakers, every inhale and exhale, meshed into a seamless track.

His body moved with it, no longer resisting, no longer lagging, just flowing.

He slid hard across the court, shoes squealing against polished wood as he cut off Toya's lane just in time.

But Akito was already there.

"Coming through!"

A blur of orange hair and sharp energy darted in, intercepting the pass mid-stride with a cocky grin. He spun on his heel, bypassing An like water slipping through fingers, and the next second his arm was rising, ball poised for the layup.

"Tch—!" An bit down a curse, pivoting fast, but she was a step too late.

Yuu didn't think.

He moved.

Feet slammed the floor. His body coiled like a spring, launching skyward.

The world slowed.

The ball hung in the air like a suspended note, gliding toward the rim.

His fingertips grazed rough leather—

Smack!

The sound split the moment.

The ball ricocheted off course, clattering onto the floor.

"Whoa!" An's eyes widened as she snatched it up. "Nice save, Yuu!"

Yuu landed hard, sneakers skidding, his breath hitching sharp in his chest. But… no burn in his legs. No fire in his lungs.

Just a clarity, a ringing rhythm, that kept pulling him forward like invisible strings.

Akito’s voice cut through, sharp and grinning, "Don't celebrate yet!"

“An!” Yuu’s voice cut through the echo of sneakers against polished wood.

“I’m on it!” she shot back without hesitation, clutching the ball tight as she pivoted on her heel.

Across the court, “Come here, dimwit!”

An’s eyes narrowed. “Who are you calling a dimwit, huh!?”

“I’m impressed, Yuu-kun,” Toya said, his calm voice carrying a hint of surprise. “I didn’t think you’d pull that off.”

Yuu gave a small smile, wiping the sweat from his forehead. “That was just luck.”

He and Toya stood ready, eyes on Akito and An as they set up for their next move.

(To be fair… that was all thanks to my [Concentration] skill. Everything slowed down, every dribble, every breath, while my thoughts moved faster than any human’s.)

A quiet sigh escaped his mind.

Cheater.

“Yuu!” An’s voice cut through the echo of sneakers squeaking on the polished floor. She launched the ball toward him with a sharp, clean pass.

“On it!” Yuu reacted instantly, palms absorbing the force as the ball smacked into his hands.

Yuu gripped the ball, feeling the faint tackiness of the leather under his fingertips.

Across the court, Akito was already charging at him, eyes sharp and predatory.

He’s fast.

Yuu’s gaze flicked left. Toya was guarding near the hoop, anticipating a pass.

An was behind Akito, ready to assist.

His lungs expanded slowly as the noise dimmed. The court stretched like a wide, empty path, every possible route mapping itself out in his head.

Akito lunged.

Yuu feinted right.

The sharp squeal of his sneakers filled the gym as he pivoted left at the last second, dribbling low to the floor. The air split as Akito’s arm swiped, and he missed by inches.

“Tch!”

“Not today!” Yuu muttered under his breath, pushing forward. His legs burned, but the rhythm in his mind was calm.

“Not today!” Yuu muttered under his breath, pushing forward.

[Stamina to Spare activated]

The basket loomed closer. Toya moved to block, tall and steady like a wall.

If I shoot now, he’ll block it.

Yuu skidded to a stop just outside the key, ball bouncing once, twice—then he dropped his center of gravity and spun, slipping past Toya’s side in a blur.

“Yuu!” An’s shout was distant now, drowned out by his own pulse as he leapt, body twisting in the air.

For a fraction of a second, everything froze. The rim glinted under the fluorescent lights.

[Concentration activated.]

Time crawled. The ball rolled off his fingertips with perfect spin, cutting through the silence.

Please go in.

The thud of sneakers hit the floor, then swish.

The ball sank clean through the hoop.

“YEEEES!” An cheered, throwing both arms up.

Akito groaned, dragging a hand down his face. “You’ve gotta be kidding me…”

Toya gave a small, approving nod. “Impressive.”

Yuu dropped to his knees, panting. His heart was racing, but a grin tugged at his lips.

(Okay… maybe this was worth cheating a little.)

“Yuu, are you… athletic too?” An asked, catching her breath.

"No."

“Well, that makes me feel kinda embarrassed,” Akito muttered, running a hand through his sweat-damp hair. “I’ve been practicing forever, and you—” he gestured vaguely, “—just pull that off?”

Yuu scratched his cheek, giving an awkward laugh.

(If only you knew it’s because of a skill tree… not me.)

“I’m gonna take a break,” Toya said, heading to the bench and grabbing his water bottle.

“Same here,” Akito said, following him.

“Then, Yuu, how about a one-on-one?” An grinned, spinning the ball on her finger.

“I’m… also giving up,” Yuu replied quickly, waving both hands in surrender. “Break sounds good.”

(I can't say that my skills were on cooldown for 10 minutes.)

“Huh? You guys were here?”

A soft voice came from the doorway. They all turned to see Kohane peeking in.

“Kohane! You’re here!” An brightened immediately, waving her over.

Kohane stepped inside, blinking at the sight of An, Akito, and Toya slumped on the benches. “You… all look exhausted.”

“Yeah, because someone here forgot to tell us he’s secretly a monster on the court,” Akito said, shooting Yuu a mock glare.

"Why are you looking at me?"

“Anyway,” Toya said, leaning back, “I think that’s enough for today.”

An groaned but didn’t argue. Even Akito was too winded to keep going.

“Good call,” Yuu said, trying to hide his relief. His legs still felt oddly light, like the game’s influence hadn’t worn off completely.

The sound of Kohane’s gentle laugh drew his attention. “You all really are amazing,” she said softly, her eyes bright. “I feel like… I need to work even harder now.”

An grinned and threw an arm around her shoulders. “You’re already amazing, Kohane. But if you wanna practice together, just say the word.”

As the group chatted, Yuu found himself watching them.

The way they laughed, teased, and encouraged each other was warm. Too warm for someone like him, who was supposed to be a background character in this world.

(What am I saying? I'm a protagonist too.)

[A/N: YOU CAN PUT IMAGES!! That's actually sick I might use Rich Text more than HTML]

Chapter 43

[Street Sekai]

The faint aroma of roasted beans lingered in the air, curling like whispers of warmth around the Street SEKAI café.

Neon lights outside pulsed softly through the window, their glow painting fractured patterns on the polished counter where Yuu sat.

A porcelain cup steamed before him, its dark surface reflecting a sliver of his own face.

“Say… MEIKO,” Yuu began, his voice breaking the gentle hum of the café. He lifted the cup to his lips, savoring the rich bitterness before continuing. “Do you usually brew these coffees?”

Across the counter, MEIKO chuckled, a low, warm sound that fit this space perfectly.

“Hm? Yeah. Toya and Kohane love it.” She spoke as though the answer was obvious, her hands resting with ease on the polished surface.

Yuu set the cup down with care, its soft clink punctuating his next words. “Teach me.”

“Teach you?” Her brows arched in playful surprise. “Hmm… sure. But are you sure you’ve got nothing else to do?” MEIKO leaned forward slightly, her tone teasing yet curious. “It seems like you’re always visiting every SEKAI.”

“Urgk…” Yuu stiffened, a bead of sweat forming at his temple. “Who did you hear that from?”

A smirk curved her lips. “The other me, from the School SEKAI and the Empty SEKAI.”

“…Huh.” His eyes shifted away, fingers drumming lightly against the cup. “I see.”

“You really are everywhere, aren’t you?” she said, folding her arms in amusement.

Yuu scratched his cheek, averting his gaze toward the rising steam between them.

For a moment, the café’s soft jazz filled the space where his words hesitated.

“I’m just… curious,” he said finally, forcing a casual tone. “Besides… there’s something relaxing about this place.”

MEIKO tilted her head, her crimson eyes glimmering like fine wine under the neon wash.

A knowing smile tugged at her lips. “Relaxing, huh? Well… that is my job, to make sure everyone can unwind here.”

Her gaze lingered on him for a beat before she turned, reaching for a sleek metal kettle that gleamed under the warm lights.

“If you really want to learn,” she said over her shoulder, voice smooth as the aroma curling in the air, “come behind the counter.”

Yuu blinked, startled. “Really? Thanks!”

Yuu slipped behind the counter, the faint jingle of a spoon against porcelain echoing in the quiet café.

The Street SEKAI always carried a unique atmosphere, dim neon lights bleeding through the windows, soft lo-fi beats thrumming in the background, and the faint aroma of roasted beans lingering in the air.

MEIKO stood with an easy smile, her hands already moving with the grace of someone who had done this countless times.

She placed a set of items in front of him: a hand grinder, a gooseneck kettle, and a pristine white dripper.

[A/N: Guys, I know nothing about brewing coffee, so I just researched it]

“First things first,” she began, picking up the bag of beans. “This is where it all starts. The beans decide everything, the aroma, the bitterness, even the mood of the cup."

Yuu leaned closer, peering at the glossy, dark brown beans as MEIKO tipped a few into his palm.

They were warm, almost alive with the earthy scent of roasted coffee.

“Smell it,” she said softly.

He brought them closer to his nose, inhaling the rich fragrance.

It wasn’t the harsh bitterness he expected; there was depth, warmth, almost like dark chocolate laced with something floral.

“…Wow,” he murmured.

MEIKO chuckled at his awed tone. “Good beans deserve respect. Now, grinding them…” She handed him the small hand grinder. “Your turn.”

Yuu held it awkwardly at first, adjusting his grip before beginning to turn the handle.

The motion was slow, uneven, but steady.

With every twist, he heard the faint crunch of beans breaking apart, releasing a fresh wave of aroma that curled around them like steam.

“This… is harder than it looks,” he admitted, his arms starting to ache slightly.

"Hehe, is it?" MEIKO teased, folding her arms as she watched. “Coffee isn’t about rushing. It’s about patience. Every step matters.”

When the grinding was done, MEIKO took the grounds, spreading them evenly in the dripper. Her movements were meticulous, almost like choreography.

She then heated the water, her hand guiding the kettle in a slow, spiraling pour. The first drops hit the coffee bed, and a bloom of bubbles rose like tiny bursts of life.

“Smell that?” she asked.

The air grew heavier, filled with the deep, comforting aroma of fresh brew. Yuu watched the dark liquid swirl as it trickled into the carafe below, feeling oddly mesmerized.

“…You make it look so easy,” he said quietly.

MEIKO glanced at him, her lips curving into a soft smile. “That’s because I've been doing this many times now. But you? Yuu-kun, you have potential. Your concentration is impressive."

He gave a small laugh. “If you say so…”

(I accidentally used my skill without knowing... I guess it's a passive?)

She slid the finished cup toward him, the surface rippling slightly under the dim glow of neon light. “Here. The first cup you helped brew.”

Yuu wrapped his hands around the warm ceramic, bringing it close to his lips.

One sip, and a flood of flavors danced on his tongue, rich, slightly bitter, yet layered with a subtle sweetness that lingered.

“…This is…” He paused, searching for the word. “…comforting.”

MEIKO’s smile softened. “Exactly what coffee should be.”

Just then, the quiet chime above the café door jingled, letting in a faint breeze slipped inside.

“Aoyagi-kun… and Azusawa-san?” Yuu blinked in surprise, still holding the warm kettle in his hand.

Kohane’s eyes widened as she spotted him behind the counter, an expression of pure astonishment lighting up her face. “H-Hazuki-kun? What are you doing here?”

Yuu offered a sheepish smile, setting the kettle down with a soft clink. “Ah… well, I asked MEIKO to teach me how to make coffee. Before that, I was just here to… relax.”

“I see…” Kohane said slowly, her surprise giving way to a small, amused smile as she walked closer. “That’s… unexpected.”

Beside her, Toya gave a short nod, his usual calm demeanor unshaken. “Akito and An should be on their way soon,” he added, pulling out a stool at the counter.

Kohane followed his lead, sliding into the seat next to him as her gaze flicked curiously between Yuu and MEIKO. “You look like you’re really getting into it."

“Don’t encourage him too much,” MEIKO said with a chuckle, wiping her hands on a pristine white towel. “He’s still a rookie.”

“Yeah, yeah,” Yuu muttered, trying to hide the faint flush on his cheeks as he adjusted the apron MEIKO had given him.

Kohane rested her chin on her hand, watching with quiet intrigue. “Then… since you’re being taught by MEIKO herself, I’ll take a coffee.”

“Same,” Toya said, his tone steady as always. “Black coffee for me.”

Yuu froze for half a second, then nodded with a determined exhale. “Alright. One black coffee for Aoyagi-kun… and one regular coffee for Azusawa-san.”

He reached for the bag of beans, the rich, earthy aroma rising like a warm embrace.

His fingers brushed against the metal scoop, and the sound of beans tumbling into the grinder echoed in the cozy café.

Kohane’s eyes widened slightly as she leaned forward, clearly fascinated by the unexpected sight of Yuu working behind the counter.

“Focus,” MEIKO murmured with an encouraging smile as she stood beside him, guiding his movements with the ease of a seasoned barista.

“Remember what I told you: water just off the boil, steady hands, and patience.”

“Right,” Yuu replied, his grip tightening slightly on the kettle handle.

He could feel Kohane and Toya’s gazes on him, and despite himself, a flicker of pride welled up in his chest.

Steam curled like whispers into the air as the first stream of hot water spiraled over the grounds, releasing a deep, invigorating fragrance that filled the café.

Kohane inhaled softly, her eyes lighting up. “Wow… it smells amazing.”

Yuu set the porcelain cup down with deliberate care, the soft clink against the wooden counter barely audible beneath the mellow hum of the café.

A thin ribbon of steam curled upward, carrying the faint, rich scent of roasted beans.

“Here’s your coffee, Azusawa-san,” he said, his voice steady but warm.

The light above them caught the surface of the drink, a gentle sheen of dark brown glistening like liquid velvet. “Sugar and milk are on the side, add as much as you like.”

“Thank you, Hazuki-kun!” Kohane’s cheerful voice lilted through the air as she reached for the sugar.

He offered Kohane a small, reassuring smile before shifting his focus back to the brewing station.

The kettle handle was cool in his palm now, but anticipation kept his movements precise.

“Now then…” Yuu murmured, glancing at the next order, the sharp aroma of ground beans meeting him like an old companion. “Aoyagi-kun’s black coffee. Give me a second.”

Toya rested his forearms on the counter, his posture calm yet betraying a spark of curiosity in his eyes.

He didn't speak; instead, he simply watched, his cool blue gaze following every careful motion Yuu made, as if trying to understand what had drawn him into this quiet ritual.

The stream of water narrowed into a silver thread as Yuu tilted the kettle with care, letting it spiral slowly over the bed of coffee grounds.

"You're pretty focused," he remarked, his voice low, almost contemplative. "It's… different from how you usually seem."

Yuu's lips curved faintly, not quite a smile, more a shadow of one.

"Guess I just don't want to mess it up. First impressions matter, right?"

His tone was light, but his hands stayed steady, guiding the pour with practiced precision he didn't know he had until now.

The kettle tilted upright with a soft click of metal meeting wood as he set it down. Yuu exhaled slowly, watching the coffee drip through the filter, dark and smooth like polished glass.

"Besides," he added, glancing briefly at Toya, "this feels… kind of nice. Slower than I'm used to."

Toya considered that for a moment, then gave the faintest nod, his expression unreadable but not cold. "It suits you," he said simply.

That caught Yuu off guard. His fingers paused over the cup, and for a beat, he wasn't sure what to say. The sound of dripping coffee filled the silence in his place.

Finally, Yuu chuckled softly, shaking his head. "You think so? Not sure if that's a compliment, but… thanks."

Toya's lips curved, barely noticeable, but there. "It was."

The last drop fell, and Yuu slid the finished cup toward him with quiet pride. "Here you go. Black, no sugar… just how you like it."

Toya accepted the cup, his fingers brushing the warm porcelain. He didn't drink immediately, only glanced at the coffee, then at Yuu again.

"Not bad… Hazuki-kun."

Yuu blinked, then laughed under his breath. "I'll take that as high praise."

Just then, the bell above the door chimed again.

Two figures stepped in, their voices carrying the kind of energy that didn't belong in the café's calm afternoon.

"Huh? All of you are here?" An blinked as her eyes darted around, landing on Toya, then on Yuu. "Eh? Yuu?!"

Yuu straightened slightly, his hand still near the coffee pot. "Uh… hey."

Akito followed in behind her, hands in his pockets, eyebrows raised. “Oh? New employee?” He gave Yuu a quick once-over, his smirk teasing but not unkind.

“Not really,” Yuu replied, scratching his cheek. “Just… helping out.”

An grinned, stepping closer to the counter. “Helping out, huh? Didn’t think I’d find you there, of all places.”

Before Yuu could answer, MEIKO’s voice floated from behind him, warm but carrying a tone that brooked no nonsense. “If you’re done chatting, Hazuki, the next brew isn’t going to make itself.”

Yuu blinked, glancing back at her. “Right, sorry.”

An let out a little laugh, covering her mouth with her hand. “Wow, you even got scolded. You really do look like an employee now.”

Akito leaned casually against the counter, one brow quirked. “Guess we’ll see if the guy can make coffee as good as he plays.”

Yuu sighed quietly but couldn’t hide the small tug of amusement at his lips as he reached for the kettle again. “No pressure, huh…”

“Yuu’s coffee is delicious,” Toya said calmly, his fingers wrapped around the warm cup like it was a winter comfort.

“Yeah,” Kohane, with a shy smile, nodded toward her half-empty mug. "It’s… different from the coffee An’s dad always makes.”

“Really?” An blinked in surprise as she slid into the seat beside Kohane.

“I think the way they roast their beans is different,” Toya continued thoughtfully. “I even tried using the same type of beans at home, but… it still tasted different.”

“Hehe.” An giggled, propping her chin on her hand. “You’re always trying new things. You really like coffee, don’t you? I always get mine with extra flavors and toppings. Maybe…” She tilted her head with a teasing smile. “I’ll try it black next time.”

“I wouldn’t recommend it,” Akito said dryly as he dropped into the chair beside Toya. He jabbed a thumb over his shoulder at the counter. “Barista-kun, one iced coffee for me.”

Yuu let out a quiet breath through his nose, half amused, “…Right.”

“And a simple coffee for me, Yuu,” An chimed in cheerfully, flashing him a grin like she was testing him.

“Coming right up.” Yuu moved behind the counter again, the motions smooth and practiced.

“Right, Yuu! Are you free tomorrow?”

Yuu glanced up from the counter, pausing mid-stir. “Not really…” he admitted with a sheepish smile. “Well, I’m not available during the day because of my part-time job.”

An’s expression softened into mild disappointment. “I see…”

“What’s wrong?” Yuu asked, tilting his head slightly as he set the spoon down.

“Uhm…” An hesitated for a moment, then leaned forward with a grin full of anticipation. “You see, we’re going to perform near the Shibuya Crossing, so I wanted you to be there, as our backup member.”

Akito, who had just taken a sip of water, set the glass down with a smirk. “I hope you’re not afraid of crowds, Barista-kun.”

Yuu met his gaze evenly, his voice calm and steady. “I’m not… but when is it?”

“Next weekend!” An said, her tone practically sparkling.

“Alright.” Yuu gave a small nod, determination flickering in his eyes. “I’ll make sure to free it up.”

“Sweet!” An grinned, her excitement now impossible to hide.

Yuu turned back to the counter, placing two cups down with careful precision. “And here’s your coffee,” he said, sliding the drinks toward An and Akito with a practiced ease.

“Hm?” Akito leaned forward, resting his chin on his hand. “Now that I think about it, Hazuki… what’s your part-time job?”

Yuu hesitated for half a second, then replied casually, “Assistant.”

Akito raised a brow. “Assistant what?”

“Assistant Manager of MMJ.”

The table froze for a beat.

“M…M…J?” An stammered, blinking rapidly. “What’s that?”

Before Yuu could answer, An shot up from her chair with an almost theatrical gasp. “Wait—don’t tell me… MORE MORE JUMP?!”

“Idol group,” Toya said in his usual tone, lifting his coffee cup for a slow sip.

An’s jaw practically hit the floor. “That’s amazing, Yuu!” Her voice was full of awe, eyes sparkling as she leaned over the table like she couldn’t contain herself. “You’ve been working with actual idols this whole time?! Why didn’t you tell us sooner?”

Yuu gave an awkward shrug, looking a little cornered under the sudden burst of attention. “You didn’t ask.”

Akito smirked, clicking his tongue. “Man, you really do keep pulling surprises out of nowhere.”

“What do you usually do as an assistant, Yuu?”

MEIKO asked.

Yuu hummed, thinking for a moment before replying, “Mostly schedule management. Making sure the members get to their lessons on time, handling small errands, that kind of stuff.”

An leaned in eagerly. “Do you, like… get to watch their rehearsals too?”

“Sometimes,” Yuu admitted, scratching his cheek with a faintly awkward smile. “But I’m usually in the back handling equipment or checking notes.”

“Still, that sounds awesome,” An said, her eyes practically glowing.

Toya set down his cup gently, his calm gaze meeting Yuu’s. “It suits you, though. Helping others reach their goals.”

"You've been giving me a lot of compliments now, Aoyagi-kun."

“Anyway,” An said, planting her elbows on the table and glancing at everyone with a spark in her eyes, “since we’re all here now, shall we start preparing for next weekend?”

“Yeah!” Kohane responded with a bright nod, her usual shyness melting away in the group’s warmth.

“Great!” An clapped her hands together, the sound sharp and confident, drawing every gaze to her.

Her grin widened as she turned to Yuu. “Yuu, I’m sending you a video later, so make sure you watch it, okay?”

Yuu tilted his head slightly. “Sure… Is it a choreography video?”

“Bingo, and you’d better pay attention, because we’ll be instructing you, too.”

“Noted.”

“Alright then!” An’s enthusiasm filled the quiet corners of the café, brighter than the soft jazz humming from the speakers. “Next weekend is going to be huge, so no slacking, got it?”

“Got it,” Akito drawled, leaning back in his chair with a smirk tugging at his lips. His amber eyes gleamed with that familiar mix of confidence and challenge.

Toya gave a slow, composed nod, fingers curling loosely around his cup. “We’ll make sure it’s perfect.”

“Perfect, huh…?” Yuu murmured under his breath.

An caught it, flashing him a mischievous grin. “Oh, don’t worry, Yuu. We’ll go easy on you… maybe.”

Akito let out a short laugh. “Don’t believe her.”

“Wha—Akito!” An whipped around, her voice rising in protest. Her cheeks puffed like an indignant squirrel as she jabbed a finger in his direction. “I’m not that bad!”

“Sure,” Akito said, his tone dripping with sarcasm. “Ask Kohane.”

Kohane giggled softly, lifting her hands in a small, placating gesture. “Haha… She’s really not that strict.”

And with that, the atmosphere in the café shifted from casual chatter to focused energy.

The members of Vivid BAD SQUAD leaned in over the table, their drinks momentarily forgotten as plans began to take shape.

[...7 Days Left...]

Chapter 44

The bright afternoon sunlight spilled across the shopping district, casting playful shadows on the bustling streets.

Stalls lined the walkway, brimming with accessories and trinkets that glittered like tiny stars under the sun.

“It’s been a while since we last went out shopping like this,♪” Saki said cheerfully, her voice bubbling with excitement as she took in the lively atmosphere.

Honami smiled at her, warmth tugging at her lips. “Hehe. You seem to be really enjoying yourself, Saki.”

“I’m just glad we could all come together again!” Saki twirled lightly on her heels, her blond hair catching the light as if sharing in her joy.

From behind, Shiho’s voice cut through the playful energy like a sharp note.

“Let me remind you that we’re not here to have fun. We’re here to find sheet music for songs to add to our show repertoire.”

“I know, I know!” Saki replied, though her eyes were already drifting toward a display to their left. “But this is an important chance to find some—” Her words broke off, replaced by a delighted gasp. “Oh, look! Those star bracelets are so cute!”

Shiho exhaled softly, “There she goes…”

Saki hurried over to the display, the small metallic charms sparkling under the warm glow of the shop lights. “Whoa! These are the same colors as our Phenny keychains!” Her eyes practically gleamed as she turned back to the group, bracelets jingling lightly in her hands. “Let’s buy these and wear them during our show!”

“Oh, we did talk about finding matching items the other day,” Honami said, recalling their conversation from the week before. Her chest warmed at the thought—it was such a Saki-like idea.

“That’s right,” Ichika added, her tone calm but tinged with curiosity. “I could even attach one to my guitar case when we’re not performing.”

“How about it, Shiho?” Saki beamed, holding out a bracelet like an offering. “Oh! They even have pink ones. We could all get matching colors♪”

“Pink? No way.” Shiho’s reply was immediate and flat, though a faint flush dusted her cheeks as she glanced at the display. “And if you really want them, make it quick. We’re here to find sheet music, not jewelry.”

“Okay♪” Saki chirped, unbothered, already spinning back to the glittering bracelets.

Honami let out a soft laugh, unable to help herself.

Saki hummed cheerfully as she slipped the pink star bracelet onto her wrist, spinning it slightly so the charm glittered under the soft store lighting. “It’s so cute… and it really does match our colors! Don’t you think so, Honami?”

Honami smiled warmly at her friend’s excitement. “It does look nice. And it’ll remind us of today whenever we wear it.”

Shiho sighed, already walking a few steps ahead, her hands tucked into the pockets of her hoodie.

“Are you two done yet? The sheet music section isn’t going to come to us.”

“Coming, coming!” Saki chirped, waving the small bag as she hurried after Shiho.

Honami chuckled softly and followed, glancing back to make sure Ichika wasn’t too far behind.

Ichika trailed at a relaxed pace, her guitar pick keychain jingling faintly from her bag as her eyes drifted across the aisles filled with CDs and instrument accessories.

The group finally reached a quieter corner of the store where rows of sheet music stood neatly arranged in wooden racks.

The smell of new paper and faint hints of polished wood from the nearby guitar section filled the air.

“Wow… there’s so much here,” Honami murmured, her fingers brushing over the crisp edges of a book cover.

Each shelf was packed tightly with scores ranging from classical pieces to modern J-Pop hits.

“This is the fun part! Oooh, look, this one has a whole collection of festival songs! That’d be super fun for our next performance, don’t you think?”

Shiho shot her a deadpan look as she pulled out a heavier book from the lower shelf, flipping through it quickly. “We need songs that fit our sound, not something that makes us look like we’re running a school fair.”

Saki puffed her cheeks. “Hey, festivals are fun! Fun is important too!”

Ichika giggled softly, kneeling down to check another rack. Her eyes landed on a cover with soft pastel colors and an illustration of a starry night sky.

She slid the book out and began flipping through its contents. “This one… might actually work,” she said, tilting the open book so the others could see the sheet music inside. “It’s got a mix of gentle melodies and some dynamic parts for a band arrangement.”

Honami leaned closer, “It really does look nice… It feels like something that suits us, don’t you think?”

Shiho peered over her shoulder, scanning the page briefly before giving a small nod. “It’s not bad. If you all like it, we can add it to the list.”

“Yes!” Saki exclaimed, clapping her hands together in delight. “Imagine performing this under the night sky… it’d be so perfect!”

Honami smiled, her chest warming at the thought.

Seeing everyone this way, together, laughing, sharing their ideas, it reminded her of why she loved being in Leo/need so much.

Moments like these felt precious, like little pieces of light threading through their everyday lives.

“Let’s grab this one, then,” Ichika said softly, sliding the book into her arm along with another she had picked out. “And maybe one more, just in case.”

Shiho smirked faintly. “Fine. But if we end up spending an hour here because Saki wants to read every title, I’m leaving you all behind.”

“Hey!” Saki protested, but her laughter followed.

After making their selections, the girls approached the counter with a small stack of CDs and crisp sheets of music tucked neatly under Ichika’s arm.

“Should we also buy the bracelets? I think they’d be a nice accessory to go with our outfits,” Ichika suggested, her voice soft but thoughtful, fingers brushing the edge of the tiny display stand near the register.

The pastel-colored bands sparkled under the warm light, each adorned with a small star-shaped charm that swayed gently as if beckoning them.

“We should, we should!” Saki’s eyes gleamed as she clasped her hands together, practically bouncing on her toes with excitement.

Honami chuckled softly, watching the two with a fond smile. “You really like them, don’t you?”

“Of course! If we all wear them, it’ll feel like… like we’re connected even more!” Saki beamed, the hopeful sparkle in her eyes reflecting the golden light.

Shiho sighed, shifting the bag of music sheets against her shoulder. “Fine. But if we’re getting them, let’s do it quickly. We’ve already spent enough time in here.”

Her tone was flat, but the faintest trace of a smile tugged at her lips when she thought no one was looking.

“Ah… wait.” Shiho suddenly stopped in her tracks, her brow furrowing as if a thought had just struck her. “I forgot that we also need a few things for the instruments—like maintenance supplies.”

“You’re right,” Honami replied quickly, adjusting the strap of her bag. “Strings for the guitar, maybe some extra picks too… It’s better to stock up now than panic later.”

Ichika nodded in agreement. “Good point. Let’s check the aisle before we leave.”

“Then, let’s go.” Shiho led the way toward the back of the shop, her steps brisk but purposeful. The others followed, the faint click of their shoes echoing softly against the wooden floorboards.

The maintenance section was tucked away near the sheet music corner, lined with shelves of gleaming strings, neatly stacked boxes of reeds, and small bottles of polish that reflected the

overhead lights.

Saki leaned forward, scanning the rows with wide eyes. “Wow… there’s so much stuff. I didn’t know instruments needed this much care!”

Shiho picked up a pack of strings, inspecting it with a sharp, practiced gaze. “If you want them to last and sound good, yeah. Especially since we’ve been practicing more lately.”

Ichika carefully reached for a soft cloth and a bottle of cleaner, her fingers tracing the neat label. “Better safe than sorry.”

“Agreed,” Honami said with a warm smile as she grabbed a few extra picks from the display. “This should cover everything we need.”

With their new items in hand, the girls made their way back to the register, their arms now full of not just music sheets and CDs, but the tools to keep their instruments in perfect shape.

Shiho shifted the small shopping bag in her hand, glancing at the others. “Now that we’ve bought everything we need for the instruments… want to head out?”

Honami tilted her head thoughtfully. “Okay… Oh, wait.” She checked her phone, We still have a little time before our studio reservation.”

Saki’s eyes lit up, practically sparkling with excitement. “Then can we check out some shops together?! There’s one I’ve been wanting to visit!” Her words tumbled out in a bright rush, her energy filling the space between them.

Ichika blinked, curious. “What kind of shop?”

“They carry all sorts of decor that look like instruments!” Saki clasped her hands in front of her, her enthusiasm almost infectious. “I’ve been wanting to go together ever since Shiho and I found it during the New Year’s sales!”

“Oh, that place?” Shiho raised an eyebrow, her tone casual but not unkind. “They even had some pretty obscure instruments.”

“They did!” Saki turned to her with a teasing smile. “You were so happy when you saw they had bass keychains instead of just guitars, Shiho.”

Shiho’s lips twitched into the faintest frown as her ears reddened slightly. “I… don’t think I was that happy,” she muttered, looking away.

Still, after a moment, her expression softened. “It might be worth a look, though. They had some things I think Ichika and Honami will like. Plus, we don’t want to cause the studio any trouble by arriving too early.”

Saki clapped her hands together with a cheerful, “Yay♪” Her voice sang with delight, her smile glowing brighter than the winter sunlight spilling through the storefront windows.

Honami giggled softly, tucking a strand of hair behind her ear. “Hehe… I’m looking forward to seeing what they have too!

The shop Saki had been so excited about was tucked away at the corner of a quiet street, its glass display window framed by strings of fairy lights that glimmered even in the afternoon sun.

The moment they stepped inside, the faint scent of polished wood and lavender drifted toward them, mingling with soft background music, an instrumental version of a popular tune.

“Wow…” Honami’s eyes widened as she took in the sight.

Rows of miniature violins stood on delicate wooden stands.

Glass cases displayed handcrafted ornaments shaped like trumpets and flutes, each one painted with an elegant metallic sheen.

A nearby shelf showcased ceramic mugs adorned with staff lines and floating eighth notes, while another featured framed art pieces depicting stylized guitars.

“This is so cute!” Saki darted toward a display of keychains shaped like tiny instruments.

She picked one up, holding it toward Ichika with a grin. “Look, look! They have guitar keychains! Isn’t this perfect for you?”

Ichika stepped closer, her expression softening as she examined the keychain. “It’s really nice… The details are so precise.”

“Check this out,” Shiho said, her voice calm but tinged with the faintest note of excitement as she reached for a small rack on the side.

She held up a keychain shaped like a bass, the deep color catching the warm light of the store. “They have bass ones too.”

Saki giggled. “See? I told you! You were so happy last time when you found them.”

“I wasn’t that happy,” Shiho muttered, though her fingers lingered on the item before she slipped it into her basket.

Honami wandered toward another section, her gaze landing on a delicate wind chime shaped like a cluster of silver flutes.

She touched it gently, and it gave a soft, airy sound that floated through the shop like a whisper of music. “This is beautiful… I could hang this on my backpack.”

“It suits you,” Ichika said with a smile, joining her.

She then glanced over to the far wall, where an entire section was dedicated to wall décor, vinyl records repurposed into clocks, each with a unique design in the center. “Oh… these are amazing.”

“They’d look really good in your room,” Honami said, following her gaze.

Meanwhile, Saki had gathered a few more things in her arms: a treble-clef pendant, a notebook with pastel keys on its cover, and a tiny charm shaped like a tambourine. “Everything’s so cute! I want to buy them all!”

“You’re going to run out of space if you keep that up,” Shiho remarked, though the faint curve at the edge of her lips betrayed her amusement.

They spent the next several minutes drifting through the aisles, the cozy sound of soft jazz playing through the shop’s speakers filling the background.

As they left the shop, the bell chimed again.

“Thanks for coming with me!” Saki said cheerfully, looking at what she brought. "I’ve wanted to visit that shop with everyone for so long.”

“I’m glad we went,” Honami said with a warm smile. “It was really cute… and calming too.”

“It wasn’t bad,” Shiho admitted, eyes forward, though the faintest upward curve of her lips betrayed her. “They had good designs.”

Ichika glanced down at the blue mug peeking from her bag, a quiet smile tugging at her lips. “… Yeah. I liked it too.”

And then…

Before long, the four of them reached the studio.

They exchanged brief smiles, then pushed the door open in unison.

A gentle chime greeted their arrival, its delicate ring blending with the muffled strum of guitar strings and a distant beat bleeding from a neighboring room.

The cool air inside carried a faint mix of wood polish and lingering notes of music, like echoes of creativity lingering in every corner.

Down the softly lit hallway, soundproof walls muffled the vibrant energy of other performers, making the space feel like a quiet sanctuary for musicians.

Their footsteps tapped lightly against the smooth floor as they approached the door marked with their reservation.

With a click, it swung open, revealing the studio room, a bright, spacious haven lined with acoustic panels and sleek equipment.

Honami exhaled softly, a small smile tugging at her lips as she stepped inside.

Our space for the day…

Slowly, they each moved to their spots, the quiet hum of anticipation settling over the room.

Saki carefully unfolded the stand for her keyboard, her fingers grazing over the polished keys with something close to reverence.

Across the room, Ichika and Shiho crouched over their guitar cases, the sound of latches clicking open punctuating the stillness.

Ichika lifted her guitar with gentle hands, the wood gleaming in the faint glow of twilight spilling through the window.

She ran her thumb over the strings once, the muted vibration sounding like a breath before a song. Beside her, Shiho adjusted the strap of her bass with deliberate precision, every movement calm and methodical.

Meanwhile, Honami had already claimed her place at the drum set. She twirled a drumstick idly between her fingers, the soft tap-tap against the snare almost playful.

“Alright,” Shiho said finally, straightening her back, her voice cutting cleanly through the low murmur of sound. Her tone was calm but carried a quiet determination. “Let’s make the most of our time.”

Ichika nodded, a small, focused smile curling on her lips. “Yeah… let’s.”

The faint glow of the setting sun kissed the edges of their instruments as they shared a glance, a silent agreement, a spark that tied them together before the music began.

[An hour later]

“Hah… finally, we managed to get through those three songs,” Ichika said, breathless yet smiling faintly as she rested her guitar across her lap.

Saki stretched her arms above her head with a groan, as she let out a relieved sigh.

“Whew… I think my fingers are gonna revolt if we try a fourth.” Despite her words, her eyes shimmered with the joy of playing.

Honami spun one of her drumsticks slowly between her fingers, her smile easy and warm. “But we didn’t sound bad at all. Way better than the first run.”

Just then, a soft buzz broke the comfortable quiet of the studio.

Ichika blinked and tilted her head toward the small wooden stool where her phone rested.

The screen glowed faintly in the dim light. “Hm?” She rose from her spot with an unhurried grace, her guitar strap sliding from her shoulder as she placed the instrument down gently.

Her fingertips brushed against the cool glass as she picked up the device. The name flashing across the screen made her eyes widen ever so slightly. “Hazuki-kun?” she murmured under her breath, voice soft as ripples over still water.

That single name was enough to pull the attention of the others.

The phone vibrated again in Ichika’s hand. She unlocked it, and the message appeared clearly:

“Hey Hoshino-san, are you free right now?”

The weight of three stares bore down on her immediately.

“Oh?” Saki’s voice rang with uncontained glee as she hopped down from the amp, eyes sparkling like a child unwrapping a present. “Ichika… is that Yuu-kun inviting you on a date?!”

Her tone was playful, teasing, loud enough to make the quiet room hum with sudden energy.

Ichika's cheeks flushed faintly pink, and she shook her head quickly, words caught in her throat like fluttering paper. "Eh? N-no, that's not—"

Shiho straightened slowly, resting her bass against the wall as she crossed her arms, her blunt voice slicing clean through the room's charged air. "That's exactly what it looks like."

Honami giggled softly from behind her drum kit, her reliable warmth diffusing the teasing tension like sunlight melting frost. "Come on, let her explain first, Saki."

Ichika's breath hitched, the warmth creeping up her neck until her ears burned crimson. She fumbled with her phone, clutching it to her chest like it was some secret diary laid bare. "E-Eh?! It's not—Saki, it's not like that!" Her voice wavered, soft but pitched with panic.

Saki leaned forward with a mischievous glint in her bright eyes, "Come on, Ichika! You don't just light up like that over a random text. That blush says it all!"

She clasped her hands together dramatically. "It's a date, isn't it?!"

Ichika shook her head so fast her short hair brushed against her cheeks.

"N-No! He just—he just asked if I'm free… That's all!" Her words tumbled out, every syllable pleading for normalcy, though her trembling fingers betrayed her.

"Mm-hm," Shiho's voice cut in, low and unamused as she crossed her arms, leaning back against the drum kit like a stern judge.

Her sharp gaze pinned Ichika in place. "That sounds exactly like the start of a date."

Ichika flinched, her throat tightening. "Shiho! You too?!"

Honami chuckled softly, her smile gentle as always, though her eyes carried that knowing glimmer. "Ichika, it's okay. If you want to hang out with him, we can wrap up early next time. Don't stress over it."

"I-I'm not—! It's just… He probably needs help with something," Ichika muttered, staring down at the floor as if it could swallow her embarrassment whole.

The phone still buzzed faintly in her palm, a quiet reminder that the message hadn't gone away.

Saki clasped Ichika's shoulders suddenly, her grin wide enough to outshine the fluorescent lights overhead. "Then let's not keep him waiting, hmm? Oooh, what if he wants to treat you to something sweet? Like crepes! Or ice cream!"

"I—Saki, please—!" Ichika's protest melted into a squeak as her friends surrounded her like a pack closing in on their prey.

Shiho sighed, pinching the bridge of her nose, though a faint smirk tugged at her lips, betraying her amusement.

In the corner of her eye, Ichika caught Honami's reassuring nod, and for a moment, her heart stilled. Her friends weren't teasing out of malice; they were happy for her.

Maybe… maybe she could reply.

She glanced back down at the glowing screen, her pulse hammering as her thumb hovered over the keyboard.

The message hovered on Ichika's screen like an unexpected spark in the quiet after practice.

"If you'd like, can you help me pick up shoes? I'll tell you the details when we meet."

Ichika blinked, reading the words twice, no, three times, just to make sure her eyes weren't playing tricks on her.

Her breath hitched, a faint warmth crawling up her neck as the simple request tangled with her thoughts in ways she couldn't quite untangle.

Saki was the first to lean in, her bright eyes scanning Ichika's face like a hawk, zeroing in on prey. "Well? What's it say? Is it a date?" she asked, voice bubbling with mischief.

Ichika nearly dropped the phone. "N-No! It's not—he just—" The words tangled on her tongue, spilling out in fragments as the heat in her cheeks deepened. "He… wants help. With… shoes."

There was a beat of silence before Saki clapped her hands together dramatically. "Shoes?! Ohhh, classic first date code! 'Help me shop,' huh? That's practically romantic!"

"Saki," Honami said gently, though her lips curved into an amused smile, "I think it's just what it sounds like. Right, Ichika?"

Ichika swallowed hard and nodded, though it felt more like a desperate attempt to convince herself than anyone else. "R-Right. Just… shoes. That's all."

Shiho's low chuckle broke through the chatter as she slung her bass across her back. "You're blushing over shoes, Ichika. That's a first."

Her words were teasing but softened by sincerity, her sharp gaze flicking briefly to Ichika's crimson face. "Go on. Help him. You'll feel better than hiding here."

Ichika looked down at her phone again, her pulse quickening as the weight of expectation and something warmer settled over her. Her fingers hovered for only a moment before she typed back, each tap deliberate, steady.

"Sure. Where should we meet?"

The message sent with a quiet whoosh, leaving her staring at the screen, heart thudding in her ears like the echo of their last drumbeat.

For a second, none of the girls spoke.

Then Saki grinned, looping an arm around Ichika's shoulder with a conspiratorial whisper: "Good luck, Ichika~."

The words made Ichika's chest squeeze and her stomach flutter all at once.

She smiled faintly, uncertain and glowing, the phone still warm in her hand.

To be continued

Chapter 45

Ichika stood near the center of the bustling shopping mall, the guitar case slung across her back like a familiar weight. Her fingers fidgeted against the strap, betraying the nervous energy simmering inside her.

The steady hum of passing trains beyond the glass and the faint chatter of shoppers swirled into a blur around her.

Why am I this nervous?

She wondered, stealing another glance at her phone screen.

It wasn't like she hadn't met friends outside of practice before.

This should feel normal. So why… does it feel so different?

She opened the message thread for what must have been the fourth time.

Hazuki Yuu: Let's meet at the middle of the shopping mall. There should be a bench there. Wait for me there.

That was ten minutes ago. Which meant—

"Sorry to keep you waiting, Hoshino-san."

Ichika flinched at the sound of his voice.

Her head turned instinctively, and there he was.

Yuu Hazuki approached with his usual composed expression, but today, there was something else about him, something that made her breath catch for a moment.

His outfit wasn't anything flashy, yet it carried a kind of effortless style that drew the eye.

A light gray denim jacket hung loosely over his frame, the sleeves folded up to the elbows with a casual precision.

Beneath it, the dark hood of his black sweatshirt peeked from the collar, adding a layered streetwear edge to his look.

A sleek, black sling bag cut diagonally across his chest, its strap pulling the jacket snug against him.

"Oh, um… no, I just got here too!" Ichika replied hastily, waving her hands in a small flurry before realizing how obvious that sounded.

Her cheeks warmed, and she quickly lowered her hands, biting back a nervous laugh.

Yuu gave a quiet chuckle, the sound soft but carrying a teasing note that made her pulse jump. His gaze flicked briefly toward the streams of people moving around them before returning to her.

“Thanks for coming,” he said simply, his voice calm as always, yet somehow more… gentle. “I wasn’t sure if you’d be free.”

He paused, eyes landing on the guitar case behind her shoulder. “Oh—you just finished practice with Leo/need?”

“Yeah!” Ichika answered quickly, almost too cheerfully.

“I see.” Yuu’s lips curved faintly in a half-smile, his tone carrying a hint of guilt. “Sorry… I’m sure you must be tired.”

Ichika shook her head so fast her hair brushed against her cheeks, strands catching the light like fine threads. “N-No! It’s fine, really! I was looking forward to this!”

Ichika adjusted the strap of her guitar as Yuu walked up beside her, his presence calm yet oddly commanding amid the bustle of the mall.

“So…” Ichika began, voice softer than she intended. “Why are you looking for shoes, Hazuki-kun?”

Yuu tilted his head slightly, the edge of a smile playing on his lips. “Hm? Ah, right. I did say I’d explain.” He cleared his throat, his eyes shifting briefly toward the floor as if choosing his words. “Do you know Vivid BAD SQUAD?”

“Hm? Of course!” Her eyes brightened, the tension in her chest easing as excitement slipped through. “They’re a talented street music unit. Why?”

“I’m actually the fifth member.” He paused, then lifted a hand almost defensively. “Well… backup member.”

Ichika blinked, surprise flashing across her features. “Really? That’s amazing!”

She wasn’t exaggerating. Vivid BAD SQUAD wasn’t just any group. Their performances pulsed with energy, every note dripping with passion. The idea of Yuu being part of that world somehow… felt like it fit.

“Yeah, right?” Yuu’s chuckle was low, almost sheepish, his hand slipping into his jacket pocket. “And, well… I’m gonna need new shoes. My old ones aren’t good enough anymore.”

“Hmmm~ I see,” Ichika hummed playfully, folding her arms and pretending to scrutinize him like a teacher about to give advice.

Yuu’s expression softened at that, the corner of his lips twitching into a grin. “Oh, not just shoes,” he added casually, as if the thought had just occurred to him. “I think I’m gonna need a few clothes too.”

Ichika tilted her head slightly, strands of her blue hair brushing her cheek as she smiled. “So… a full-on shopping?"

“Something like that.” Yuu glanced toward the rows of shops stretching ahead, the warm mall lights reflecting faintly in his eyes. “If you don’t mind tagging along, that is.”

“Of course not,” Ichika replied quickly—maybe too quickly. Her cheeks warmed, and she shifted her gaze toward the crowd to mask it. “I mean, since I’m already here…”

“Good.” Yuu’s tone carried that calm assurance again, the kind that made it feel like everything he said was set in stone. Adjusting the strap of his sling bag, he gestured toward the escalators. “Come on. Let’s make this easy before the stores get crowded.”

The two of them weaved through the racks of clothes, the ambient hum of the store’s playlist filling the silence between their exchanges. Rows of jackets, hoodies, and accessories stretched out like a street fashion gallery, each piece daring for attention under the white fluorescent lights.

Ichika skimmed through the options with a quiet concentration, her fingers brushing over fabric as if testing its weight and texture.

Then, something caught her eye. She plucked a slightly oversized black hoodie from the rack, its cotton material soft yet structured enough to fall neatly over the shoulders.

“Since Vivid BAD SQUAD performs in street outfits, I think this suits you better, Hazuki-kun,” she said with a small smile, turning to him.

Her other hand reached for a short, black utility vest hanging nearby, its multiple pockets and zippers adding an edge to the clean hoodie. She layered it over the garment with a subtle confidence before holding it up for his view. “Over it, this vest should do. What do you think?”

Yuu tilted his head slightly, studying the combination. The sleek, dark tones contrasted with the casual vibe he usually carried.

"Hmm~… Alright,” he said, a faint smile tugging at his lips. “Is it okay if I try it on?”

Ichika nodded softly. “Of course.”

He unstrapped the sleek crossbody bag resting diagonally on his torso and placed it on the small cushioned bench nearby.

With the chosen outfit in hand, Yuu disappeared behind the curtain of the changing booth.

A minute passed. The distant hum of the store filled the space between them again, Ichika absentmindedly adjusting the sleeve of her cardigan while waiting.

The curtain finally rustled, and then, Yuu stepped out.

The black hoodie draped loosely over his frame, its oversized design giving him a relaxed silhouette without swallowing him whole.

Over it, the utility vest cinched slightly at his shoulders, lending sharpness to the soft fabric underneath. Paired with his slim jeans and well-kept sneakers, the outfit transformed him from a quiet, ordinary presence into someone with a hint of street-cool confidence.

Ichika blinked once, her lips parting ever so slightly as if words momentarily escaped her. The lighting caught the faint gleam of the zippers on his vest, accentuating his lean frame.

Yuu scratched his cheek lightly, breaking the silence. “So… what do you think?”

“Y-You look… cool, Hazuki-kun!” Ichika’s voice cracked slightly as her eyes widened. A faint blush dusted her cheeks, betraying her composed tone.

“Really?” Yuu glanced at her with a crooked smile, tugging at the hem of the oversized hoodie.

The fabric draped comfortably over his frame, its dark color contrasting against his pale skin. The utility vest layered over it added a sharp, street-inspired edge, practical, yet effortlessly stylish.

Before Ichika could respond, a cheerful voice cut through the moment.

“Hello, sir, ma’am.”

Both turned to see a sales associate approaching, her professional smile warm and practiced.

Her eyes lingered on Yuu for a second longer than usual, clearly assessing the outfit. “Oh? Are you two looking for streetwear? Casual outfits?”

“Streetwear,” Ichika answered quickly, her tone polite yet firm.

The associate nodded thoughtfully, tilting her head as if considering a mental checklist. “Just a question, sir… are you planning to dance?”

“Yeah.” Yuu’s answer was short, but the glint in his eyes made it sound confident.

“Then I recommend keeping that outfit,” the associate said with a smile before stepping back toward the racks. Her heels clicked lightly against the polished floor as she sifted through hangers, finally pulling something free.

“This.” She held it up for them to see, a gray bomber jacket with sleek black trim lining the collar, cuffs, and hem.

The fabric caught the light subtly, hinting at durability without sacrificing style. “And I think you should wear at least a white T-shirt underneath to balance the layers. It’ll give the outfit more structure while keeping it breathable for movement.”

“Then I’d like to try it,” Yuu said with a calm nod, taking the bomber jacket from the sales associate.

“Of course, sir,” she replied warmly, passing the item into his hands. With that, Yuu disappeared behind the curtain once again, the fabric swaying shut with a soft rustle.

The sales associate turned to Ichika with a knowing smile, her tone teasing yet polite. “Ma’am, you have a cool boyfriend.”

Ichika’s entire face flushed crimson in an instant. “B-boyfriend?!” she stammered, waving her hands in frantic denial. “N-no! We—we’re just friends! I mean… companions! I mean… u-uhm…” Her voice trailed off into incoherent murmurs as she fumbled over the words, cheeks burning like embers.

The associate chuckled softly, clearly amused, and raised her hands in mock surrender. “Ah, my apologies! You two just look close, that’s all.”

Ichika could only press her lips together, still flustered, and glance nervously toward the curtain where Yuu was changing.

(Companions…? Why did I even say that?)

The faint metallic jingle of hangers and the soft swish of fabric came from behind the curtain, mingling with Ichika's racing thoughts.

Yuu stepped out.

The black bomber jacket fit him perfectly—not too tight, yet sharp enough to give a clean silhouette.

Underneath, the simple white tee contrasted against the dark fabric, making the silver zipper and pocket accents stand out.

He adjusted the sleeves slightly, glancing at himself in the nearby mirror. "Hmm… feels good. Not too heavy either."

Ichika, on the other hand, found herself momentarily speechless. Her gaze trailed from the jacket down to his slim-fit jeans and the way his hair caught the soft overhead lighting.

(Why… does this suit him so well?)

"So?" Yuu turned toward her, tone casual, almost oblivious to the effect. "What do you think?"

"I–I…" Ichika blinked rapidly, her mind scrambling for words as heat crept back to her cheeks. "It… it looks great on you! Like… really great." Her voice cracked slightly at the end, making her wince internally.

Yuu's lips curved into the faintest smile. "Thanks. Guess this one's good, then."

The sales associate chimed in, clearly enjoying the moment. "You two make a stylish pair. Perfect match."

"W-we're not—!" Ichika's voice jumped an octave, but Yuu only chuckled softly, sparing her the trouble of fumbling further.

"Alright," he said, tugging lightly at the hem of the jacket before turning back toward the booth. "I'll take this one."

With their new purchases neatly folded into the paper bag, Yuu adjusted the strap on his torso and glanced toward Ichika.

"Uhm… Hoshino-san… are you okay?" he asked softly, noticing how her expression hadn't relaxed since the sales associate's comment earlier.

"I'm fine, Hazuki-kun," she replied a little too quickly, her voice stiff but gentle.

Yuu tilted his head slightly, unconvinced. "Hm… are you perhaps hungry?"

"Hm? N-no! I'm fine, rea—"

Her words were cut off by the unmistakable sound of a stomach growling. Ichika froze, her entire face blooming crimson as her gaze darted away like a startled cat.

“I…” she muttered, almost too quietly to hear.

Yuu chuckled, warm and genuine, the sound easing the tension in the air. “Alright,” he said, a small smile curving on his lips, “let’s go eat before heading to the shoe section.”

Ichika didn’t answer, just turned her head further to the side, cheeks still glowing.

(How embarrassing…!)

[Meanwhile…]

A short distance away, three figures lingered near a rack of handbags, trying their best to blend in. Or at least, that was the intention.

Saki peeked over the edge of her oversized sunglasses, barely hiding her grin. “Hehehe… I can’t believe this is actually happening! Ichika and Yuu-kun... on a shopping trip together!"

“Keep your voice down,” Honami hissed, tugging the brim of her hat lower over her face. Her cheeks were already tinted pink. “If they see us, this will be so awkward.”

“They won’t notice,” Saki said confidently, giving a little twirl of her pink scarf. “I mean, look at us! Totally undercover.”

Shiho stood a few steps away, arms crossed, her hat tilted so low it practically covered her eyes. Her voice was flat. “You both look ridiculous.”

Saki puffed her cheeks. “Says the one hiding behind a music magazine like some suspicious character in a drama.”

“It’s called being subtle,” Shiho shot back, turning a page without looking up. “Unlike someone giggling every five seconds.”

Honami sighed, clutching her tote bag like a lifeline. “You guys… why are we even doing this? We should just trust Ichika…”

Saki leaned closer, whispering like a co-conspirator. “Because this is fun! Don’t you want to know what they’re talking about?”

Before Honami could protest, Yuu and Ichika exited the store, walking side by side.

“There they go!” Saki whispered urgently. “Operation Follow Them Without Getting Caught is a go!”

Shiho muttered, “That’s the dumbest name I’ve ever heard,” but she still fell in step behind them with a quiet sigh.

“Oh! They’re entering a café!” Saki gasped, practically bouncing on her heels. “Follow them!”

“Shh!” Honami flailed slightly, grabbing Saki’s arm. “People are staring…”

“They’ll stare more if you keep doing that,” Shiho muttered under her breath, already sliding her hands into her pockets as she started toward the café. “Let’s just get this over with.”

The three trailed after Yuu and Ichika, who had already disappeared inside. A soft chime rang as they pushed the door open, greeted by the warm aroma of coffee and pastries.

“Wow…” Saki whispered, eyes sparkling as she scanned the cozy interior. Then, remembering the mission, she ducked behind Honami. “Okay, act natural.”

“Acting natural doesn’t mean hiding behind me like a shadow,” Honami sighed, tugging her scarf nervously. “We should… um… sit somewhere far away.”

“Far away?” Saki gasped. “No way! If we can’t hear them, what’s the point?”

Shiho groaned, already heading to an empty booth near the window—coincidentally the one diagonally behind Yuu and Ichika. “This is fine. Just… don’t make it obvious.”

Saki plopped down beside her with a grin. “You’re surprisingly good at this, Shiho.”

“I’m not good at this,” Shiho deadpanned, opening her menu like a shield. “I just want to avoid making a scene.”

Honami slid into the seat across from them, whispering nervously. “What if they notice us? What do we even say?”

Saki leaned in with a mischievous smile. “Easy. We say… this is a *total coincidence* .”

Shiho lowered her menu just enough to glare. “Worst cover story ever.”

Meanwhile, across the room, Yuu and Ichika were completely oblivious—laughing softly as they settled into a corner table.

“Shhh!” Saki hissed suddenly, clutching her iced coffee like a spy gadget. “They’re talking!”

Honami buried her face in her hands. “This is so embarrassing…”

[Inside the café]

The warm hum of conversation filled the small café, along with the soft aroma of roasted coffee beans and freshly baked pastries.

Yuu and Ichika sat across from each other at a small wooden table by the window. Sunlight spilled across the surface, glinting off their drinks.

An iced coffee for Yuu, and a strawberry latte for Ichika.

Ichika cupped the glass with both hands, trying to calm her heartbeat after the string of embarrassing moments earlier.

Her reflection in the glass looked as flushed as she felt.

"So…" Yuu leaned forward slightly, resting his arms on the table. "Thank you for coming with me, Hoshino-san.”

Ichika blinked, caught off guard. "E-Eh? Oh, um… you're welcome..”

Yuu smiled faintly. "Honestly, you have good taste. That bomber jacket? If the sales associate didn't recommend it, I probably would've gone with what you picked anyway."

Her fingers tightened around her glass. Good taste… The compliment warmed her cheeks. She quickly sipped her drink to hide it.

"What about you?" Ichika asked softly, daring to glance at him. "Do you… Usually wear that kind of style? Street fashion, I mean."

"Not really," Yuu admitted with a short laugh. "But if I'm going to start dancing more with Vivid BAD SQUAD… maybe I should. I need to look the part, right?"

"You'll look fine no matter what you wear, Hazuki-kun," Ichika murmured before realizing what she said. Her eyes widened, and she waved her hands frantically. "I-I mean, not like that! Just that… you'd suit anything! Probably!"

Yuu tilted his head slightly, amused. "That's… a nice thing to say."

Ichika sank into her chair, mentally screaming.

[At a table behind them]

Three figures in oversized hoodies, hats, and sunglasses leaned in comically close, straining to hear every word.

Saki whispered, barely containing her excitement. "Did you hear that?! Ichika said he looks good in anything!"

Honami tried to hush her, but her own cheeks were pink. "Keep it down, Saki. We're supposed to be… subtle."

Shiho, arms crossed, muttered under her breath, "…This is so ridiculous." But despite her words, her ears were angled toward the conversation like a radar dish.

"Do you think they're… on a date?" Saki whispered again, her voice trembling with suppressed energy.

Honami hesitated. "I-I mean… they are shopping together, and eating together… so maybe…?"

Shiho sighed, though her eyes flicked to Ichika's flushed face and Yuu's easy smile. "…It's not a date. Probably."

So? How's Leo/need?” Yuu asked, his tone casual as he leaned back in his chair.

Ichika brightened immediately. “We're doing alright!”

“I see.” Yuu's gaze softened, a small smile tugging at his lips. “That's good to know.” He paused, then tilted his head slightly, curiosity flickering in his eyes. “Did the sales associate say something while I was changing?”

“Huh? Ah! Hahaha… N-Nothing!” Ichika laughed awkwardly, waving her hands just a little too quickly.

“She just… thought that I’d also look good in streetwear.” Her voice faltered on the last word, the lie hanging in the air like a thin thread.

Yuu’s expression didn’t change much, but there was a hint of amusement in his voice when he replied. “Hmm… I bet it looks good on you.”

Ichika blinked, heat creeping up her cheeks. “R-Really?”

Before she could dwell on it, a sudden muffled thump broke the moment. Both turned toward the next table where three figures, disguised in oversized sunglasses and floppy hats, had frozen like startled animals. Saki, her face twisted in panic, clutched her knee under the table.

“S-Sorry!” she hissed, frantically waving her hands at her companions. “I just—hit the table—”

Shiho dragged a hand down her face, exhaling through her nose. “Be careful. You’re going to blow our cover,” she muttered, lowering her hat brim until it nearly covered her eyes.

“Shh!” Honami leaned forward, pressing a finger to her lips while her wide eyes darted between Ichika and Yuu’s table. “They’ll hear us!”

Completely oblivious to the chaos next door, Ichika cleared her throat and pressed on. “… Anyway,” she began, her voice slightly higher than before. “Hazuki-kun, when did you start hanging out with Vivid BAD SQUAD?”

“Hm?” Yuu blinked, turning back to her. “I don’t remember.”

Ichika tilted her head, feigning suspicion. “Oh? Or maybe you just don’t want to tell me?” A playful smirk curved her lips.

“If I remembered, I’d definitely tell you,” he replied evenly, though a small chuckle escaped him.

Ichika propped her chin in her hand, a hint of admiration shining in her eyes. “That’s really cool. Maybe I should go watch you perform?"

“Sure.”

Before she could respond, the clink of plates interrupted them as a waiter arrived with their order.

The waiter’s gaze flicked briefly toward the neighboring table and lingered.

“…Are you three… alright?” the waiter asked slowly, suspicion clear in his tone.

Honami’s eyes widened as panic surged through her like a tidal wave, and before she could stop herself, the words tumbled out in a loud, strangled rush: “YES! WE’RE… TOURISTS! VERY NORMAL TOURISTS!”

The silence that followed was suffocating.

The waiter blinked once.

Twice.

His brows knitted in confusion, but—after an uncomfortably long pause—he gave a reluctant nod and walked away, muttering something under his breath about "strange customers."

"…Weird," Yuu murmured, his eyes narrowing slightly as he glanced toward the trio. His gaze lingered for a moment, sharp and probing, like he was trying to piece together something familiar.

Ichika tilted her head, a questioning look on her face. "What's wrong?"

"…Thought I saw someone I know," Yuu said at last, before shrugging it off and reaching for his drink.

At the other table, the three girls ducked behind their menus in perfect unison, their hearts pounding like drumbeats in their ears.

That was too close.

The aroma of freshly brewed coffee lingered between them as Yuu stirred his drink absentmindedly, watching the ripples spread across the surface. Ichika lifted her cup to her lips, blowing softly before taking a sip. For a moment, neither spoke, the soft hum of chatter and clinking dishes filling the space between them.

"…You seem different lately," Ichika said suddenly, setting her cup down with a quiet clink. Her gaze softened, almost hesitant, but her eyes held a glimmer of curiosity that refused to waver. "Since the last time we talked… You've changed."

Yuu blinked, meeting her eyes. For a brief second, the weight of her words pressed against his chest. Different, huh? He exhaled through his nose, forcing a faint smile. "Really? I don't feel like I've changed much."

"I'm serious." Ichika leaned forward slightly, her fingers lacing together on the table. The warm café light cast a gentle glow over her face, accentuating the determination behind her calm demeanor.

"Back then, you always seemed… distant like you were watching everything from far away. But now… You feel closer. More… alive, somehow."

Yuu chuckled under his breath, though his gaze drifted to the window. Outside, people passed by in blurred silhouettes against the afternoon sun.

He tightened his grip on his cup, feeling the ceramic warmth seep into his skin. "Maybe… I just found something worth moving toward."

Ichika tilted her head, curiosity deepening. "Something? Or someone?"

The question hung in the air, delicate yet sharp, like a string pulled taut. Yuu's fingers froze mid-motion, his thoughts scattering for a heartbeat.

"…You ask a lot of personal questions, you know," he said at last, his tone light but carrying an edge of truth. A small smile curved his lips, as if to soften the weight of his words.

Ichika smiled faintly in return, her eyes narrowing just slightly in playful defiance. “That’s because… I want to understand you better.”

On the other side of the room, three figures stiffened in unison behind their menus.

“Wha—did she just say that?!” Saki’s voice was a harsh whisper, her cheeks turning pink under her oversized sunglasses.

“Lower your voice,” Shiho muttered, though even she had paused in surprise, her grip on the menu tightening.

Honami’s hands trembled slightly as she peeked over the laminated edge. “…I think… this is more serious than I thought.”

Yuu cleared his throat, his gaze flicking toward the next table,

“But… Hoshino-san,” he murmured, leaning closer so only she could hear, “don’t you think they’re a bit too noisy?”

Ichika blinked, then followed his gaze. The corner of her lips curved into an awkward smile as realization dawned. “Ah… I’m sorry,” she said softly, guilt lacing her tone.

“Eh?”

That single syllable cut through the air like a pin dropping on glass. Both Yuu and Ichika turned their heads toward the source, Saki peeking out from behind an oversized menu that barely hid her grin.

Finally, Saki let out a sheepish laugh, lowering the menu with an air of surrender. “Looks like…” she started, her voice dropping into a playful tone, “…we’ve been caught.”

Ichika sighed, the sound carrying equal parts exasperation and fondness. “…Seriously?” she said, though her eyes betrayed the faintest spark of amusement.

Yuu stared at them, his expression hovering somewhere between confusion and disbelief. “…You’ve got to be kidding me,” he muttered under his breath, before straightening in his chair and raising an eyebrow at the trio. “You were following us?”

“No!” Honami blurted out, far too quickly.

Her voice cracked under the weight of her panic, and she flailed her hands in frantic denial. “We just… happened to be here!”

Shiho lowered her menu just enough to shoot her a flat look. “…In sunglasses and hats. Indoors.”

“Details!” Honami hissed back, face burning crimson.

"I mean... I don't mind." Yuu said with a calm smile, leaning back slightly in his chair. His tone wasn’t harsh or teasing, just genuinely relaxed, which made the three girls freeze mid-motion.

"R-really?!" Saki asked, her voice cracking with surprise as she pulled down her sunglasses.

"Mm." Yuu nodded lightly. "Though… next time, you might want to pick better disguises. Hats and shades? That's kinda textbook."

Saki puffed her cheeks. "I *told* you, Honami, we should've gone with masks!"

"Don't drag me into this!" Honami whispered back, though her ears were already burning pink.

Shiho, on the other hand, crossed her arms and muttered, "I knew we'd get caught. This was pointless from the start."

Ichika stifled a laugh and shook her head. "You three… seriously, what are you doing here?"

"U-uh, w-we were just—" Saki began, fumbling for an excuse.

"Shopping!" Honami jumped in quickly, her words coming out almost too fast. "Y-yeah! We were out shopping, and then we… uh… coincidentally saw you two and thought… um… we could say hi?"

"Sure," Yuu replied, his voice calm and strangely reassuring, which somehow made the three of them feel more guilty.

Shiho narrowed her eyes at him. "You don't… seem surprised."

Yuu shrugged slightly, his eyes drifting to the coffee cup in his hand. "You're Ichika's friends. Makes sense you'd be curious."

Ichika flushed at that, glancing away with a tiny frown. " *Curious* , huh…?"

Saki leaned forward, resting her chin on her hands. "Sooo… what were you two talking about? Looked pretty serious before we came over."

"Personal stuff," Yuu answered casually, his tone leaving no room for teasing.

That made Saki blink. " *Personal stuff* ?"

Ichika quickly waved her hands, her face heating up. "I-it's nothing! Really! Just… a normal conversation!"

Saki smirked a little, her curiosity only growing. Honami gave a soft, nervous laugh, while Shiho kept her gaze fixed on Yuu, silently assessing him.

Before the silence could stretch, Yuu placed his cup down and said, "Since you're all here… why don't we just eat together? You've probably been following us for a while, right?"

"Yeah…" Saki looked at Ichika, "Sorry to ruin your date, Ichika."

"I-It's not a date!" she blurted, her voice cracking slightly.

"Really? Because it *totally* looks like one. Don't you think so, Hazuki-kun?"

The question hung in the air like a spark waiting to ignite.

Yuu didn't flinch. He simply lifted his glass of iced coffee, taking a slow sip as if he had all the time in the world. When he finally set it down, a faint smile curved his lips.

"Well," he said, tone even yet carrying an almost teasing undertone, "I don't really mind what you call it."

The words hit Ichika like a sudden chord change, throwing her completely off balance. She froze mid-motion, her pulse skipping as her ears burned hot. "W-What do you mean by that…?" she muttered, barely above a whisper, her fingers tightening around the edge of her glass.

Shiho, sitting with her arms folded and an unreadable expression, let out a quiet hum. "Interesting…" Her sharp eyes flicked toward Ichika, who looked ready to sink under the table. "So… you're the one who dragged him here, right?"

"I-I didn't drag anyone!" Ichika sputtered, her words tumbling out like a string of missed notes. "I just… offered to help him, that's all!"

Honami finally spoke with a gentle smile that felt like a warm breeze cutting through the tension.

"Well, it's nice of you to help. Hazuki-kun looks good in those clothes, by the way."

"Thanks," Yuu replied with an easy nod, then glanced sideways at Ichika, his calm gaze brushing against her like the steady strum of a guitar string. "But honestly, Hoshino-san has a good eye for fashion. Her advice helped a lot."

"E-Eh? I… I didn't do that much…" Ichika mumbled, her voice shrinking as her fingers nervously twisted her straw. Her reflection rippled in the glass of her untouched iced tea, a mirror of her flustered state.

The conversation meandered after that, drifting into lighter notes. Saki, of course, couldn't resist sprinkling in more teasing, each comment making Ichika's responses grow shorter and softer.

Even Shiho's stoic facade cracked once or twice, a ghost of a smirk tugging at her lips.

Yuu placed his empty glass down with quiet decisiveness, the soft thud echoing like a cue to wrap things up. Adjusting the shopping bag in his hand, he rose to his feet.

"Well," he said, his voice carrying that calm certainty again, "we should probably head to the shoe store before it gets too late."

Ichika nearly jumped up in relief, nodding far too quickly. "Y-Yeah! Let's go."

Saki lounged back in her chair, a sly grin dancing on her lips as her gaze followed them. "Don't let us interrupt your little outing any longer. Have fun, you two~."

"It's not—!" Ichika began, but the protest wilted on her tongue as Yuu held the door open for her, his expression unreadable but his gesture unmistakably polite. Her face warmed all over again as she slipped past him, her pulse pounding louder than the chatter of the café.

Honami watched them go, her soft smile lingering like a secret. "…They seem really comfortable together," she murmured, more to herself than anyone else.

Shiho exhaled through her nose, the corner of her mouth twitching upward just slightly. “Comfortable, huh…? I’d call it awkward in a cute way.”

“Should we keep following them?” Saki whispered, her eyes sparkling with mischief.

Honami shook her head, the brim of her hat casting a gentle shadow over her calm expression. “No… let’s give them some space. It’s their day.”

The three lingered a moment longer, eyes fixed on the glass door where Yuu and Ichika had just stepped out.

Saki rested her chin against her palm, lips curving in a wistful smile she didn’t quite realize she was wearing. A soft, reluctant sigh escaped her as her foot tapped lightly against the floor.

Just as Honami reached for her glass, Saki’s voice slipped out in a barely-there murmur, a thought not meant to be spoken aloud:

“…I want to try dating too.”

Her words lingered in the air, fragile and uncertain, like the delicate chime of glass.

“Hm?” Honami glanced up, blinking. “Did you say something, Saki?”

Saki’s eyes widened slightly. She waved her hands quickly, her cheeks coloring as she forced a bright laugh. “Mm—nothing! Nothing at all.”

“…You don’t mind it, do you?” she asked at last, her voice softer than it had been inside. “Being… dragged into all this. Talking with me. With the others.”

Yuu blinked, surprised by the question. “Dragged in?” He tilted his head. “I wouldn’t call it that. Honestly, Hoshino-san, I… I don’t think I mind at all.”

Ichika’s pace slowed just slightly, her gaze falling to the ground ahead. “I see. That’s good.” A small smile tugged at her lips, fleeting, almost reluctant. “Sometimes, though… I wonder if I’m asking too much of people. Even just… wanting them to stay by my side.”

Yuu studied her carefully.

“…That doesn’t sound selfish to me,” he said gently. “If anything… it sounds human.”

Ichika stopped in her tracks, eyes widening slightly at his words, as though he’d brushed against something she’d been guarding.

“…Hazuki-kun,” she murmured, her voice almost hesitant, “can I ask you something… personal?”

Yuu turned toward her, brows raising. “Of course. What is it?”

Ichika’s fingers tightened on her bag strap, her steps halting completely this time.

“…Hazuki-kun. Why do you always look… like you’re somewhere far away?”

(Huh...?)

Chapter 46

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

"…Hazuki-kun. Why do you always look… like you're somewhere far away?"

Yuu blinked, caught off guard.

He opened his mouth, then closed it, unable to respond right away.

Ichika turned to face him, her expression calm but her eyes filled with quiet intensity.

"Whenever we talk, or even when you smile… there's this distance. Like you're standing here, but a part of you isn't. I can't help but notice."

He hadn't expected her to ask something so direct.

"…Lonely, huh?" he murmured, a smile tugging weakly at his lips though it didn't quite reach his eyes. "You see a lot more than I thought, Hoshino-san."

"I just… I know what it feels like. To be surrounded by people and still feel far away from them."

For a moment, Yuu didn't know what to say.

His heart thudded with a strange unease, part discomfort, part gratitude, because Ichika had pulled at something he usually kept buried beneath routine and indifference.

"…Maybe I am a little lonely."

She just walked beside him in silence, her steps light, her gaze turned toward him but never demanding.

"…It's strange, People see me, talk to me, laugh with me sometimes. And yet… It feels like I'm still… outside of everything. Like I'm watching it all happen from a step away."

He smiled faintly, but it was worn at the edges.

"Joining Vivid BAD SQUAD, hanging out with everyone… I thought maybe it would change. And it does, in little ways. But when it's quiet again, when I'm alone—it feels like I'm back where I started."

"…Hazuki-kun, I think… I know what you mean."

Yuu turned his head toward her, surprised.

She offered a small, vulnerable smile. "Even when I'm with Leo/need, or with my friends… sometimes I feel that same distance too. Like my heart's a little out of sync with everyone else." She lowered her gaze, her voice barely above a whisper. "…It's hard to explain, but… I understand."

The weight of their conversation lingered, but neither seemed to mind. It was as though some invisible barrier between them had thinned, allowing them to breathe a little easier beside one another.

By the time they reached the shoe store, the warm evening lights had already spilled across the polished windows.

“Wow…” Ichika whispered, her eyes darting across the shelves. “There are so many to choose from.”

Yuu adjusted the shopping bag in his hand, his gaze scanning the racks with practiced calm. “Mm. I’m not exactly picky, but… I’ll need something I can actually move in. Durable. Comfortable.”

Ichika tapped her chin thoughtfully, then pointed at a sleek pair of black-and-white sneakers with a subtle splash of red on the sole. “What about these? They look light, but sturdy. And… well, I think they’d suit you.”

Yuu crouched down, lifting the display shoe into his hand. He turned it over once, then slipped it onto his foot to test the fit. Standing, he gave a few experimental steps, the sound of the rubber sole tapping softly against the tiled floor.

“How does it feel?” Ichika asked, leaning forward with a curious sparkle in her eyes.

He looked down at the shoe, then up at her, a small, genuine smile tugging at his lips. “…Not bad. Actually, it feels really good.”

Her own lips curled into a relieved smile. “Then you should get them.”

A sales associate quickly appeared to assist, fetching Yuu’s size and boxing the pair neatly. After settling at the counter and paying, Yuu slung the bag over his shoulder.

“Alright,” he said as they stepped back outside into the fading evening light, “mission accomplished.”

Ichika laughed softly, brushing a strand of hair behind her ear. “You make it sound like we just completed some kind of quest.”

Yuu glanced at her from the corner of his eye, his expression unreadable at first, before the faintest trace of amusement broke through. “…Maybe we did.”

The glass doors slid open behind them, and the cool evening air swept in to greet them.

Streetlamps flickered awake one by one, scattering soft pools of golden light across the pavement. The once-bustling mall had begun to quiet, the steady stream of shoppers thinning into a gentle trickle.

Yuu adjusted the strap of his bag, glancing down at his phone as the screen glowed against the darkening sky. “...Already six,” he murmured, surprised by the time.

Ichika blinked, her eyes widening. “Eh? Really? It felt like… we were only out for a little while.”

“Guess it goes by faster when you’re not watching the clock,” Yuu said, slipping the device back into his pocket.

His voice was calm, but there was something softer beneath it, like a faint warmth carried on the night breeze.

Ichika hugged her guitar case strap closer to her shoulder, her footsteps falling in rhythm with his as they started walking.

The air was cooler now, carrying the faint aroma of street food from a nearby stall, the hiss of a grill, and the laughter of a family drifting in their direction.

For a moment, everything felt strangely peaceful.

“Hazuki-kun,” Ichika began, her voice quiet, almost hesitant. “...Thank you for today. I… had fun.”

He turned slightly, catching the shy curve of her smile beneath the dim streetlight.

His lips tugged upward in return, simple but genuine. “…Me too.”

Yuu slowed his pace, glancing sideways at Ichika. Her steps had grown lighter, almost hesitant, as if she wasn’t quite ready for the day to end.

“Want me to walk you home?” he asked, his tone calm yet carrying a trace of concern.

Ichika shook her head gently, brushing a strand of hair behind her ear. “Mm… I’m good.” Her voice was soft, but steady.

Yuu studied her for a moment longer, then a small smile tugged at his lips. “...Thank you, Hoshino-san.”

She blinked, tilting her head slightly. “For what?”

“For today,” he said simply, his gaze turning forward again. “And for keeping me company.”

With that, the two parted ways at the quiet corner of the street.

Yuu lifted a hand in a small wave before turning down the opposite path, his steps steady, the rhythm of his sneakers blending into the evening bustle.

Ichika walked a few paces before instinct made her stop.

She turned her head, her eyes searching through the sea of people illuminated by neon signs and shop windows.

There he was.

His figure slowly swallowed by the crowd, becoming smaller and smaller until he seemed like just another face among the many.

Her lips parted almost unconsciously, the word slipping out in a soft whisper only the night could carry.
“…Protagonist.”

She held the thought close, then turned away, continuing down her road with a faint, unreadable smile.

[6 Days Left…]

Back at Yuu's perspective

The following afternoon, Yuu sat behind a cluttered desk stacked with paperwork, merchandise samples, and schedule binders.

The office of MORE MORE JUMP!'s manager always had a faint buzz to it, ringing phones in the background, staff voices discussing stage logistics, the faint hum of a copy machine working overtime.

Across from him was Ayaka.

She adjusted her glasses as she scanned through a performance schedule.

"Hm? Hazuki-kun," she said suddenly, her eyes flicking down. She pointed toward the floor beside his desk. "Is this yours?"

Yuu leaned over.

Resting against the leg of the desk was a modest-looking bag, black, slightly worn from use, its strap curled like it had been set down in a hurry.

"Hm?" Yuu leaned down, eyes following Ayaka's finger. Resting neatly against the leg of the desk was the black bag he'd been carrying earlier. He blinked, then gave a small nod. "Ah, yes. That's mine."

"I see." Ayaka's gaze lingered a moment longer.

She crouched slightly, brushing a hand along the strap as if weighing it in her mind. "It seems your bag is quite heavy…"

Yuu gave a small chuckle, straightening the stack of promotional letters he was reviewing. "Well… it has my notebooks in it. Of course it would be heavy." His voice carried a touch of amusement, but the corners of his lips softened into something faintly wistful.

Ayaka hummed in thought, narrowing her eyes slightly before leaning back. "Hmm~ I see."

Before Yuu could comment, a familiar voice cut in.

"What's wrong, Ayaka-san?"

Airi Momoi strode over, balancing a clipboard against her hip.

Ayaka gave a small, knowing smile as she folded her arms. "Nothing in particular, I was only remarking that Hazuki-kun's bag seems unusually heavy."

Airi tilted her head, her expression sharpening slightly. "Heavy? What are you carrying in there, Hazuki-kun?"

Yuu paused, his fingers tapping once against the stack of letters before he lifted his gaze to meet hers. "…Just notebooks."

“Hmmm~ how suspicious,” Airi said, narrowing her eyes as she leaned closer to Yuu’s desk. Her voice had that teasing lilt, but the intensity in her gaze made it feel more like an interrogation than a joke.

“There’s nothing to be suspicious about, you know?”

“Mkay then~,” Airi sang, though her grin turned sly. She crossed her arms and tilted her head at him. “I mean, you’re not the kind of person who would take advantage of your position just to take pictures of us, right?”

“Eh? N-No…!” Yuu stiffened immediately, hands instinctively pulling back from his desk as if to prove his innocence.

Airi smirked at his reaction, clearly entertained. “What’s with that panicked face? I was only kidding. Unless…” she leaned closer, her tone dropping playfully sharp, “you really do have something to hide?”

Yuu groaned under his breath, one hand pressing against his temple. “You’re impossible sometimes, Momoi-san.”

“Hey, I’m just making sure,” Airi replied, straightening up with a shrug, her tone softening only slightly. “I’ve dealt with enough pushy people in this industry to know better than to let my guard down. You seem nice, Hazuki-kun, but I’ll still keep an eye on you.”

Ayaka chuckled lightly from her seat, eyes flicking between the two. “Now, now, Momoi-san. Don’t scare our assistant. Hazuki-kun has been nothing but helpful so far.”

“…Tch. I’m not scaring him,” Airi muttered, though she crossed her arms again, cheeks puffing slightly. After a pause, she added in a quieter voice, “Just… don’t make me regret trusting you, okay?”

Yuu blinked, caught off guard by the sincerity beneath her words. He gave a small, genuine smile. “…You won’t.”

A few hours later... The session finally wrapped up after hours of steady practice, the studio lights casting a warm glow on the four tired but determined idols of MORE MORE JUMP!.

Sweat still clung faintly to their skin, but the sense of accomplishment lingered stronger than fatigue.

[Switching to MORE MORE JUMP! Airi Momoi's Perspective]

“Haah… the other parts were so difficult…” Shizuku sighed softly, brushing a strand of hair behind her ear. Her voice was light, but there was a faint slump to her shoulders that betrayed her exhaustion.

Airi immediately pounced on the opening, hands planted firmly on her hips. “You don’t have time for any of that! You’re the type that learns by doing, so just keep trying and keep going, okay?!”

Startled, Shizuku blinked at the firmness in her tone, then nodded quickly. “Okay! I will. But…” her gaze shifted gently across the room. “How was Minori doing…?”

The two turned toward Minori, who was busy rubbing her shin sheepishly. “Well… I tripped over my foot again…” she admitted with a nervous chuckle.

“You’re stepping into it much better now.” Haruka’s calm, reassuring voice filled the space, as steady as always. Her eyes softened as she offered Minori a small nod. “I’m sure you’ll start getting it soon, so let’s work on it together.”

Minori’s face brightened instantly, her energy renewed. “Okay! I’ll try harder!”

Shizuku tilted her head, her expression unreadable at first before she let out a breath and looked straight at Airi. “…Airi, praising me might help me improve faster too.”

Airi froze, blinking once. “H-Huh? How can you say that with a straight face? We’re not changing anything, okay? If you want praise, go ask Haruka for help…”

“But…” Shizuku leaned a little closer, her smile soft but insistent. “…I want you to praise me.”

Airi’s jaw slackened, her composure faltering. For a beat, she stood there completely silent, caught off guard by Shizuku’s earnestness.

Finally, she dragged a hand down her face and groaned. “Sigh… Fine.”

“Really?” Shizuku’s eyes lit up, her voice dipping into a gentle, almost playful rhythm.

“Y-Yeah, yeah. You did well, okay? There, I said it.” Airi crossed her arms, clearly flustered, trying to mask the faint color warming her cheeks.

Shizuku’s soft laugh rang out like a chime. “Hehe… okay, I’ll do my best then.”

“You’re so easy…” Airi muttered under her breath, though her lips quirked ever so slightly upward.

Just then, she reached into her bag, rifling through it absently, only to stop abruptly, her brows furrowing. “…Wait. I think I left something in the practice room!”

“Huh? Really?” Haruka raised an eyebrow, clearly surprised. “That’s a first.”

“Oh, come on! You know I’m human too!” Airi puffed her cheeks in annoyance, slinging her bag over her shoulder before darting toward the door. “Be right back!”

The others exchanged glances as the sound of her hurried footsteps echoed down the hall.

Airi jogged lightly down the hallway, muttering under her breath.

“Seriously, how could I forget something so basic…” The soles of her sneakers squeaked faintly against the polished floor, her breath steady but quickened from the rush.

As she neared the practice room, she slowed.

A low beat drifted through the corridor, steady, rhythmic, the kind of pulse that belonged more to a street performance than to their polished idol routines.

The faint bass reverberated against the walls, strange and out of place.

“…Music?” Airi’s brow furrowed.

When she reached the door, she froze. The lights inside were still on, the door left slightly ajar. From within, the beat grew sharper, layered with a rap-style rhythm that carried a raw, unpolished energy.

“Someone’s here…?” she whispered under her breath.

Curiosity tugged at her, overriding hesitation. She leaned in, pressing a hand lightly against the frame, and carefully peered through the crack.

Her eyes widened instantly.

“…Huh?”

There, in the very center of the mirrored room, a lone figure moved to the beat.

The dancer’s motions were sharp, fluid, and unapologetically free, spins, footwork, and gestures that carried none of the idol-like polish, but instead radiated the raw confidence of the streets. The rhythm of the music coursed through every motion, their body cutting through the air with precision and attitude.

Airi blinked rapidly, gripping the doorframe as if to steady herself. The beat thudded in her chest, the dancer’s movements crisp and alive with a raw edge that didn’t belong to the world of polished routines she was used to seeing.

Her lips parted in disbelief.

“…Wait… isn’t that…”

The figure turned with a quick spin, the rhythm carrying him across the mirrored floor.

“…Hazuki-kun?”

Her whisper slipped out before she could stop it.

The sight of Yuu, usually so quiet and reserved while helping around as Ayaka’s assistant, dancing with such intensity left her momentarily speechless.

The music crashed to a stop, leaving only the echo of his breathing to fill the practice room. Yuu froze in his final pose, arms extended, sweat beading lightly at his brow. For a moment, the silence felt louder than the beat had been.

Slowly, he exhaled, shoulders dropping as the adrenaline drained away.

“Oof… How was it, MEIKO?” he asked, raising his wrist.

A soft shimmer of light bloomed from his smartwatch, MEIKO’s holographic figure appearing above the dial, arms folded as her sharp eyes scanned him.

“Mmm… it looks good,” she admitted, her voice carrying its usual mature steadiness.

“But I think it’s better if you dance with the group from now on. You’re not bad alone, but your steps would blend stronger with others.”

Yuu chuckled weakly, rubbing the back of his neck. “Alright, alright. I’ll practice with everyone.”

MEIKO gave a small nod, then added with a playful smirk, “Copy! Also, Miku wants to add a few steps, so you'd better come, okay?”

“I will, I will,” Yuu sighed, though the corner of his mouth twitched into a small smile.

With that, MEIKO’s figure flickered away, leaving the faint glow of the screen before it dimmed to black.

Yuu let out another long breath and turned toward the mirrored wall.

But his reflection wasn’t the only thing staring back at him.

His eyes widened—the faint outline of a face lingered in the doorway’s gap, half-hidden by shadow. The recognition hit him a split second later.

“AHH?!”

He spun around sharply, heart leaping into his throat as the door creaked open just enough for him to see who was standing there.

“A-Airi-san!?” His voice cracked slightly, betraying his usual calm tone. “W-What are you doing here?”

The silence stretched a beat too long before Airi finally stepped into the room, her expression caught between surprise and something harder to read.

The rap track still hummed faintly in the background.

“I should be asking you that,” she said, crossing her arms, though her voice was softer than her usual sharp edge. “Hazuki-kun… you were dancing.”

Yuu swallowed, rubbing the back of his neck as if he’d just been caught with a secret he had no excuse for. “Ah… well… yeah. I didn’t think anyone would be around at this hour…”

Airi tilted her head, still staring at him as though trying to reconcile the quiet, ever-reliable assistant with the figure she’d just seen moving to the beat with unexpected intensity.

“…You’re not bad,” Airi muttered from the doorway, her voice low and begrudging, as though the words had slipped out before she could stop them. Realizing what she’d just said, she quickly straightened her posture and cleared her throat, masking her surprise behind her usual sharpness. “But seriously—what are you even doing practicing here, alone?”

Yuu blinked, caught between embarrassment and the rush of being discovered. He rubbed the back of his neck, avoiding her eyes.

“Well… I was just trying to improve myself since…”

He stopped, lips pressing together.

He couldn't exactly admit that his room was far too cramped for this kind of choreography, nor that he avoided dancing in any of the SEKAI to keep it from feeling too unreal.

Airi tapped her chin, her gaze narrowing before her lips curled into a sly grin. "Ahh, I get it!" she declared with sudden conviction, pointing at him as though she'd just solved a mystery.

"Get it?"

"You're here to practice your dance to impress someone, aren't you?!"

Her tone was triumphant, a teasing lilt cutting through the quiet of the room.

Yuu's mouth fell open in shock, the heat rushing to his cheeks as he waved his hands quickly in protest.

"Wha—No! That's not it at all!"

"Okay, seriously," Airi pressed, stepping into the room with her arms folded. Her sharp eyes trailed over him, as if peeling away excuses. "Why did you suddenly use this practice room? I mean, I know you're here to practice, but…" She tilted her head, almost mocking, "…you don't really look like a dancer."

The words struck harder than she likely intended.

Yuu flinched, his gaze dropping to the polished floorboards.

For a moment, his chest tightened as if the comment had cut deeper than it should have.

"…I'm trying," he said quietly, the words slipping out almost like a plea rather than a defense.

Airi blinked at the sudden shift in his tone, but before she could say anything, she caught the faint echo of the beat still playing in her memory—the rhythm he'd been moving to just moments ago. Her brow arched.

"Hmmm~" she hummed, tapping her chin with exaggerated thoughtfulness. "From what I heard earlier… was that hip-hop? Or something straight out of the street scene?"

Yuu hesitated, then gave a small nod. "…Well… yeah."

"Ohhh." A slow grin spread across Airi's face, a spark of curiosity igniting in her eyes. "Interesting."

Just then, the faint creak of the studio door reached their ears. Four figures stepped hesitantly inside, their silhouettes framed by the dim corridor light.

"Airi?" Shizuku's gentle voice called out, laced with curiosity. Her gaze swept the room, first to her friend standing near the doorway, then shifting past her to the boy still lingering in the center of the practice floor.

Her eyes widened slightly. "…And Hazuki-kun?"

The atmosphere rippled, as though the air itself had been caught off guard.

Minori peeked around Shizuku's shoulder, her oversized bag bouncing lightly against her hip.

"Eh—? Yuu-kun? You were here too?" she asked, bright-eyed with surprise.

Haruka, ever composed, lingered at the back of the group. Her sharp gaze lingered a moment longer than the others, her expression unreadable as she took in the sight of Yuu alone in the studio, sweat clinging faintly at his collar.

Yuu stiffened. His reflection still loomed in the mirror behind him, frozen mid-pose from where he'd stopped moments ago.

For a beat too long, silence hovered. He adjusted his breathing, forcing composure into his voice.

Haruka finally stepped forward, her arms folded neatly across her chest as she regarded Yuu.

"What are you doing here, Hazuki-kun?" she asked, her tone neither harsh nor kind, simply direct, like she expected a clear answer.

Yuu hesitated, glancing down at the polished floor before meeting her gaze again. "I… was practicing," he admitted, his voice steady but quiet.

"Practicing? That's unexpected… I didn't know you danced, Hazuki-kun."

Shizuku softened her smile.

"Wait, really? What kind of dance? Can we see it?!"

"E-eh, Minori—" Yuu stammered, caught off guard.

Haruka's expression remained unreadable.

Though her gaze softened just a fraction.

"…So you've been putting in extra effort outside your duties."

The practice room fell silent for a moment. The faint hum of the speakers and the faint scent of polished wood filled the air.

Yuu stood near the center of the mirrored floor, his reflection staring back at him with equal parts hesitation and determination.

"Show us," Minori urged, her eyes gleaming with excitement. "Just a little!"

"I… don't know if I should," Yuu replied, rubbing the back of his neck.

His voice was calm, but his gaze flicked uneasily toward the four girls watching him.

"Come on," Airi pressed, smirking with arms crossed. "You were just practicing like you owned the place. Don't chicken out now."

Yuu exhaled slowly, as if letting go of a weight. "…Alright. Just for a moment."

He walked over to the speaker, adjusting the volume.

A heavy beat filled the room, reverberating against the wooden floor and mirrored walls.

The rhythm was sharp, filled with the pulse of street-style hip-hop.

Yuu stepped into the center.

His stance shifted, shoulders loose, head tilted slightly downward.

Then, he moved.

Each step matched the beat, sharp yet fluid. His feet slid across the floor with practiced precision, a mix of popping and smooth transitions that carried surprising strength.

His arms carved through the air in perfect sync, every motion deliberate, like he had been practicing for hours when no one was watching.

The spin at the halfway point came quickly and controlled, his jacket flaring slightly before he dropped low, hitting the floor with a powerful stomp that echoed in the studio.

Shizuku's lips parted in quiet awe, her eyes following every step. Minori gasped softly, clapping her hands together before quickly covering her mouth.

Even Haruka's composed demeanor cracked slightly, her brows lifting in faint surprise.

Finally, Yuu struck a finishing pose as the beat cut off. He held it for a breath before straightening, brushing a stray lock of hair from his forehead.

"…That's it," he said quietly, his breathing steady but his eyes glancing away, almost embarrassed by their silence.

For a moment, no one spoke. Then Airi broke into a short laugh, shaking her head. "Hah… and here I thought you were just some quiet guy helping out with paperwork. Turns out you've been hiding this from us?"

Yuu gave a small shrug, his voice low. "It's not much."

"Not much?" Minori blurted, unable to hold back her excitement. "That was amazing, Hazuki-kun!"

Shizuku tilted her head slightly, her gaze lingering on Yuu's poised stance even after he had relaxed. "Now that I think about it… Hazuki-kun, you looked like an idol for a second."

Her words hung in the air like a soft note, surprising even herself. Minori's eyes sparkled as she nodded eagerly. "Yeah! Totally! The way you moved, and your expression, it really felt like something you'd see on stage."

Yuu blinked at them, taken aback. "Idol, huh…" He gave a quiet chuckle, his tone carrying a trace of disbelief. "I don't think that ever crossed my mind."

He shifted his weight slightly, glancing toward the mirrored wall where his reflection stared back.

For a fleeting moment, the word "idol" echoed in his mind. The idea felt strange, almost distant, as though it belonged to someone else entirely.

Still, the sincerity in their voices made something stir within him, an emotion he couldn't quite name.

Airi scoffed lightly, though her grin betrayed her amusement. "Hah, you say that, but with moves like that, you could totally pass for one."

Yuu scratched the back of his neck, looking away. "…I'm fine just being myself."

"Now, now, everyone. Let's leave Hazuki-kun alone for today," Haruka said gently, stepping in as the group's voice of reason.

Her tone carried that calm authority that always seemed to settle the others, and with a tilt of her head, she gestured toward the door. "Hazuki-kun, make sure to lock up before you go, alright?"

"Yeah," Yuu replied simply, giving her a small nod.

"Bye-bye~!" Minori chirped, her energy bubbling even as they filed out. She waved with both hands, her smile as bright as always.

Shizuku followed behind her, her movements graceful as ever.

She paused just briefly to give Yuu a polite bow, her hair sliding over her shoulder in a soft curtain, before slipping through the door.

That left Airi, lingering at the back.

She had retrieved the item she had forgotten—a small towel tucked under her arm—but instead of leaving right away, she turned back toward Yuu.

Her gaze, usually sharp and straightforward, softened for just a moment.

"You were… kinda cool," she admitted, the words carrying a reluctant honesty.

Her voice wasn't loud, but it was enough to echo faintly in the empty practice room.

Yuu blinked, caught off guard, his lips parting in surprise—but before he could respond, Airi had already spun on her heel, as she hurried after the others.

The door clicked shut, and silence returned to the room. Yuu stood there for a moment, staring at where she had been, his reflection in the mirror faintly smiling back at him.

"Cool, huh…" Yuu muttered, his eyes drifting toward the mirror.

Just then, his smartwatch blinked to life, projecting a small holographic figure into the air.

"Oh? What's this? Did Airi-chan just compliment you?"

Yuu nearly jumped at the familiar voice. Standing there in miniature was Kagamine Rin of MORE MORE JUMP, her hands on her hips with a mischievous grin.

"Wait—you were listening?" Yuu asked, rubbing the back of his neck.

“Of course! All of us can contact you! Though only one at a time,” Rin explained cheerfully, twirling in place as if to show off the connection.

“I see…” Yuu sighed, half-embarrassed.

Rin leaned forward with a teasing smile. “But still, I wasn’t expecting it. The fact that Airi-chan, of all people, complimented you! That’s pretty rare, you know.”

“…You don’t have to make it sound like such a big deal,” Yuu replied quietly, but his ears betrayed him, burning red.

Rin only giggled, her voice bright and teasing. “Hehe, don’t be shy, Hazuki-kun. Who knows? Maybe you really are cooler than you think.”

The hologram flickered for a moment, her smile lingering before fading into the dark reflection of the smartwatch’s screen.

Yuu stared at his reflection in the mirror once more.

The same boy looked back at him—ordinary, unremarkable… yet, for the first time, he wasn’t so sure that was the whole truth.

I guess I'm cool.

Chapter End Notes

I'll be changing my writing style from now on. (Sorry if I haven't uploaded for a few days and no i'm not burned out yet just busy with title defense)

Chapter 47

The following day, the streets of Shibuya pulsed with their usual rhythm, shoes striking pavement, chatter weaving with car horns, and the massive screens overhead flashing with endless advertisements.

Yuu stood with Akito at the edge of the scrambling crossing, waiting for the others to arrive.

The city felt alive, almost too alive, but Yuu had learned to tune out the noise.

A familiar, cheerful voice cut through the bustle.

“Well, if it isn’t Akito and Hazuki! Off to practice, are we?” Tsukasa Tenma announced with his trademark flourish, smiling wide as ever.

“Yes, pretty much. But we’re waiting for others,” Akito replied, folding his arms with an easy confidence.

“What a coincidence! Wonderlands×Showtime was also about to practice!” Tsukasa declared proudly, as though the world itself had aligned for this moment.

“Really? Then does that mean you’re waiting for Kamishiro-senpai and your other troupe member to get here?” Akito asked.

Nene, who had been quietly standing beside Tsukasa, tilted her head toward Yuu. Her eyes lingered on him with mild surprise.

“I didn’t expect you, Hazuki-kun.”

Yuu rubbed the back of his neck awkwardly. “Well, I’m part of Vivid BAD SQUAD now.”

Her eyes widened slightly. “Oh?! Really?!”

“Y-Yeah.”

“Well then, we don’t want to interrupt you two, so we’ll get going,” Tsukasa said with a dramatic sweep of his arm, voice carrying even over the noise of the crossing.

“Yeah,” Akito replied with a small nod, clearly used to that level of energy.

Beside him, Yuu met Nene’s gaze for a brief moment. She gave a polite nod, and Yuu returned it before she followed after Tsukasa. The pair disappeared into the crowd, their colors quickly swallowed by the shifting tide of pedestrians.

Akito let out a low groan, rubbing the back of his head.

“Tsukasa-senpai’s energy…”

Yuu couldn’t help but let out a small laugh, the corners of his lips tugging upward despite himself.

“What about it?” Yuu asked, tilting his head.

“Nothing,” Akito muttered, exhaling through his nose.

“It’s just that senpai is… very bright. Reminds me of An.”

“An?” Yuu echoed, blinking. After a moment, he allowed a small smile.

“Well, I guess I kinda can see it.”

Akito chuckled under his breath, almost reluctant, but the agreement settled between them like a shared understanding.

Before either could say more, the sound of running footsteps cut through the noise of Shibuya’s scramble.

“There you are!” An’s voice rang out, lively as ever. She skidded to a stop in front of them, breathless, strands of hair clinging to her cheek.

Toya followed close behind, posture steady, hands tucked into his pockets like he had all the time in the world. Just behind him trailed Kohane, quiet but keeping pace.

“You’re late,” Akito said flatly, though his eyes betrayed no real irritation.

“Sorry! I woke up slightly late!" An laughed, rubbing the back of her neck.

“Mm. It happens,” Toya replied simply.

His gaze drifted to Yuu, calm and unreadable. “You’ve been waiting long?”

“Not really,” Yuu shook his head. “We just ran into some familiar faces.”

“Oh?” An’s curiosity flickered, though she didn’t pry. Instead, she clasped her hands together, energy bubbling. “Well, everyone’s here now. Should we head off?”

The four fell into stride, weaving their way through the sea of pedestrians toward WEEKEND GARAGE. Conversation sparked naturally, as it often did.

“Hey,” Akito began, his tone shifting to business, “have we decided who’s taking the new rap part in the song?”

Toya gave a small shrug. “It could be anyone.”

“We’re still figuring it out,” An said, tilting her head. “Why?”

“Hm… Well, one of my friends owns a live house. They’re looking for performers for an upcoming event.”

“Unfortunately, we’re already booked that night,” Toya pointed out without hesitation.

“Ah, I see—” Akito started, but Yuu’s voice cut in.

“I can do it.”

The group stopped mid-step.

Four pairs of eyes turned to him.

“You can rap?” Akito asked, skeptical but curious.

Yuu shifted his gaze aside. “Well… I can learn it.”

“Learn?” Toya stares at Yuu before nodding, "Given how quickly you pick things up, I wouldn’t doubt it.”

Kohane leaned forward, her expression tinted with worry. “Will you be alright, though?”

Yuu hesitated, lowering his eyes.

“…There’s probably a skill somewhere in the system that can help me rap,” he muttered to himself, too quiet for the others to catch.

Yuu’s words trailed into silence, his reflection caught in the glass walls of a storefront they passed. For a fleeting moment, his expression hardened, as though weighing something only he could see. The others, sensing it, let the matter rest.

They walked a little further before An, ever the spark that reignited the mood, glanced sideways at Yuu with a grin.

“By the way,” she piped up, her tone light, “you said you ran into some familiar faces earlier. Who was it?”

Her question drew Toya’s attention as well; even Akito shifted slightly, curious despite himself. Kohane tilted her head, waiting quietly for Yuu’s reply.

“It was Tsukasa-senpai and Kusanagi-san,” Yuu answered simply, his voice carrying just enough over the noise of Shibuya’s crowd.

“Eh?!” An’s eyes widened, her excitement immediate. “You met Tsukasa-senpai and Nene-chan? At the scramble crossing of all places?!”

“Mm,” Yuu nodded. “They were on their way to practice, too.”

"That senpai never runs out of energy.”

Toya’s lips curved into the faintest of smiles, rare and almost imperceptible, before his gaze returned forward. “It suits him. A place as crowded and loud as Shibuya—he blends right in.”

Kohane let out a small laugh, her shoulders easing. “Still… that’s kind of amazing. To just bump into them like that.”

“By the way,” Toya’s calm voice cut through the chatter, his eyes settling on Yuu. “I heard from MEIKO that you were practicing your choreography alone. How did it go?”

Yuu blinked, startled by the sudden question. “She… told you that?”

Toya gave a small nod, expression unreadable as ever. “She mentioned it last night. I was curious.”

For a moment, Yuu hesitated. His fingers brushed against the strap of his bag, gripping it tighter. “It… went okay,” he admitted, his tone modest. “I was just trying to polish things up. I’m not really a dancer, but—”

An leaned forward, grinning wide. “Ehh, practicing alone? That’s dedication! You should’ve called me, Yuu! I’d have cheered you on!”

Kohane smiled softly at him, her voice gentler. “That’s really impressive, Hazuki-kun… dancing by yourself takes courage.”

Akito shoved his hands in his pockets, raising a brow. “Practicing alone, huh… you’re really taking this seriously.”

Yuu scratched the back of his neck, feeling the heat rise in his face. “I just… don’t want to slow everyone down.”

Toya’s gaze lingered on him a second longer, as if weighing his words. Then he gave the faintest nod of approval. “You won’t.”

Their footsteps carried them through the vibrant streets, the sound of chatter and crossing signals fading as the familiar warmth of WEEKEND GARAGE came into view.

The cozy, dimly lit café stood like a beacon in the evening glow, its wooden sign swaying gently in the night breeze.

As the door swung open, the inviting aroma of freshly brewed coffee and sizzling spices spilled out to greet them.

Behind the counter, polishing a glass with the ease of habit, stood Ken.

An’s father.

"Mmm, it seems everyone's here." His eyes shifted toward Yuu, studying him for a brief, weighted moment. "So you're part of their squad now, huh?"

Yuu stiffened, caught under the weight of his gaze. “Y-Yes, sir.”

The faintest smile tugged at Ken’s lips. “That’s the spirit. I’ve heard about you from An.”

“Wait—what?” Akito shot An a look. “You’ve been talking about Hazuki to your dad?”

An flailed, cheeks pink. “I-It’s not like that! I just said he was helping us, okay?!”

Ken’s chuckle rumbled low in his chest as he set the glass aside. “Relax, An. I’m only making conversation.”

Then his tone sharpened, steady and commanding. “More importantly, I’m here to train you five. So get ready.”

“Yes!” their voices rang in unison, echoing against the café’s wooden walls.

With that, the five of them began their training, each one handed a task tailored to sharpen their edge.

For starters, An was tasked with diving into the roots of street culture itself, researching its rhythms, its movements, and weaving those influences into a sound that would still pulse with the identity of Vivid BAD SQUAD.

Akito was pushed to step outside his comfort zone, told to explore new musical genres that stretched beyond the boundaries of traditional street rap.

Toya, ever composed, was challenged to sit down with pen and paper, writing original lyrics and melodies that could shape the group's unique voice.

Especially now, with a new member in their midst, Ken made it clear: they needed to define themselves.

Kohane faced perhaps the most daunting task of all—improvisation. She was to practice singing freely, to let her feelings spill out without hesitation or restraint, her voice guided not by caution, but by raw honesty.

And meanwhile… Yuu.

Ken leaned back against the counter, folding his arms as his gaze settled on Yuu.

"Hmmm... An told me that you can basically do anything since you're a quick learner."

Yuu blinked, caught off guard. "Ah... Do I?" He scratched at the side of his neck, unsure if he should take that as praise or just pressure.

Ken chuckled softly, but his eyes were serious. "Let me ask you this, Hazuki-kun. What is Vivid BAD SQUAD to you?"

Yuu lowered his eyes, thinking. His fingers tapped against the edge of the table unconsciously, as if searching for the right rhythm to his words.

"Vivid BAD SQUAD is... loud," he began slowly. "Not just in sound, but in how it feels. Everyone puts themselves out there with so much energy—An, Akito, Kohane, Toya… they shine in ways I can't. But at the same time, when I'm with them, I feel like… maybe I don't have to stay in the background forever."

He lifted his gaze toward Ken, a little hesitant but earnest.

"So… to me, it's not just a group. It's a place where I want to test what I can really do. Even if it's scary."

Ken studied him for a long moment, the silence heavy but not uncomfortable. Then a faint smile tugged at the corner of his mouth.

Ken folded his arms, his brow furrowed in thought as his gaze shifted toward the ceiling. "Hmm… I see. Then your task for today is…" He let the words hang in the air, the silence stretching until Yuu tilted his head in anticipation. "…to explore each side of Vivid BAD SQUAD."

"Eh? Explore?" Yuu echoed, confusion flashing across his face.

"That's right." Ken tapped a finger against his chin, his expression distant, as though he was piecing together a puzzle in his mind. For a brief moment, his lips tightened, then loosened as

realization struck. “Hazuki, do you know chess?”

Yuu blinked at the sudden question. “…Yeah.”

“In chess, there’s the king, the queen, the rook, the knight, the bishop… and the pawn.” Ken’s voice dropped lower, deliberate, like the slow shuffle of pieces across a wooden board. His eyes sharpened as he looked back at Yuu. “The king represents Vivid BAD SQUAD as a whole. The queen, An. The knight, Akito. The rook, Toya. And the bishop, Kohane.”

He paused, his gaze steady as if to make sure Yuu absorbed every word.

“And you,” Ken continued, his tone firm yet not unkind, “you’re going to be their pawn.”

“A… pawn?” Yuu’s voice wavered.

“That’s right.”

Silence slipped between them again. Yuu’s fingers twitched at his side, his eyes lowering to the floor. He repeated the word quietly, as if testing the weight of it on his tongue.

“A pawn…” He hesitated, unsure if the role was meant to belittle or empower him. Finally, he lifted his gaze, uncertainty shadowing his expression. “…Is that… good? Or bad?”

Ken’s lips curved faintly, the kind of smile that carried both patience and weight. He leaned back against the counter, arms crossing as he regarded Yuu with a steady gaze.

“Good or bad?” he repeated softly. “That depends on how you see it. Most people dismiss the pawn because it’s small, because it moves slow, because it looks powerless compared to the rest.” His voice deepened, steady as stone. “But that’s exactly what makes it special.”

Yuu blinked, listening intently.

“The pawn,” Ken went on, tapping a finger against the counter as though emphasizing each word, “is the only piece that can grow. It starts at the front, unassuming, overlooked. But if it pushes forward—if it endures, step by step—it can become anything on that board. A knight, a rook, even a queen.”

The café’s warm light glinted against his eyes as he studied Yuu, his tone both testing and encouraging. “So tell me, Hazuki… being the pawn, will you see it as a weakness?” He tilted his head slightly, a challenge hidden in his gaze. “…Or will you see it as the chance to become more than anyone expects?”

Yuu’s gaze lowered, caught between the grain of the wooden floor and the steady weight of Ken’s words. For a long moment, silence pressed in, broken only by the faint hiss of the espresso machine behind the counter.

Finally, he drew in a quiet breath. His hands curled faintly at his sides, as though anchoring himself, and he lifted his head.

“I…” his voice came soft at first, wavering with hesitation, before hardening into something clearer. “…I want to see this as a chance to become more than anyone.”

The words left him like a promise, to himself as much as to the others.

Ken studied him for a beat longer, then the corner of his mouth curved upward in something just shy of approval.

“Alright then, Hazuki-kun,” Ken said at last, his tone carrying both expectation and quiet trust. “You know what to do.”

“Yeah.”

With those words, the unspoken agreement settled.

Across the room, however, the rest of the group exchanged uneasy glances as they watched the silent exchange.

“What the heck are they doing?” Akito muttered, narrowing his eyes at Ken and Yuu.

“I don’t know…?” An tilted her head, baffled.

Kohane shifted on her feet, her hands lightly clasped together. “It… kinda looks serious.”

Toya, ever calm, crossed his arms, gaze fixed on Yuu. “…Maybe that’s the point.”

Chapter 48

The following day, Yuu sat atop the small rooftop structure, legs dangling over the edge, his gaze fixed on the endless blue above.

A gentle breeze brushed through his hair, carrying with it the faint sounds of the city below—distant chatter, the hum of traffic, and the occasional call of a bird cutting through the morning quiet.

From up here, the world looked smaller. The courtyard, the classrooms, the streets beyond, it all seemed like pieces on a board, each one moving according to unseen hands.

He exhaled softly.

The soft creak of the rooftop door broke the quiet hum of the wind.

Yuu's head turned. Instinctively, he swung his legs off the ledge and crouched low, pressing himself against the surface of the small structure.

His heart skipped once—was it a teacher?

He peeked from behind the corner.

Instead of a scolding adult, a familiar figure stepped out beneath the sunlight—a tall boy with choppy purple hair streaked with two lines of cyan that shimmered when the light hit them.

Rui Kamishiro.

A second-year student. And the kind of person Yuu could never quite read.

In the game, Rui and Nene were childhood friends—neighbors, partners on stage, and creative conspirators. He was the brain behind Wonderlands×Showtime's shows, an actor, director, and inventor rolled into one. The kind of person who blurred the line between genius and eccentricity.

Basically, Kamishiro-senpai is a cheat character even without the system, Yuu thought dryly.

"Hmm?" Rui's head tilted, eyes catching the movement above. Then a light smile curved his lips. "Ah? Hazuki-kun? What are you doing up there?"

Yuu stepped forward, dropping from the ledge with a soft thud. "Hello, senpai," he greeted, brushing the dust off his sleeves. "I'm just… chilling right now."

Rui clasped his hands behind his back, eyes bright with curiosity. "You're usually with Aoyagi-kun or Shinonome-kun."

"Ahh… well, I decided to be alone for a while."

"Hmmm~" Rui leaned slightly forward, the sound more of a purr than a hum. "Is something on your mind, perhaps?"

“Say, senpai,” Yuu began, his voice barely louder than the wind brushing across the rooftop. “How scary is it to perform in front of many eyes?”

Rui blinked, caught off guard—not by the question itself, but by the quiet earnestness behind it.

“How scary…” he echoed, tasting the words like they were something delicate and bittersweet. A small, contemplative hum followed. “Quite terrifying, actually.”

Yuu looked up, startled by the blunt honesty. Rui noticed the reaction and chuckled softly, his voice warm and laced with humor.

“It’s true,” he said, walking toward the railing. The sound of his shoes against the concrete was light, unhurried. “Standing on stage means revealing everything—your thoughts, your heart, your flaws. It’s like offering your soul to a crowd and hoping they don’t tear it apart.”

“There’s no promise that they’ll understand you. Or even like you. Sometimes you can feel hundreds of eyes weighing down on you at once, and every breath feels heavier for it.”

His tone wasn’t dramatic; it was almost tender, touched by nostalgia.

“But… It’s also exhilarating. Because for that one fleeting moment, those same eyes belong to you. Their world, their heartbeat, their wonder—it’s all yours. Fear and joy become two halves of the same dance.”

Yuu stood still, watching the afternoon light spill across the rooftop tiles. The silence between them wasn’t empty—it pulsed softly, alive with meaning.

“I think the fear never really goes away,” Rui said at last, glancing over his shoulder. His eyes gleamed, sharp and gentle all at once. “You just learn to dance with it instead of running from it.”

“Dance with fear, huh…” Yuu murmured, lowering his gaze.

Rui smiled knowingly. “Why do you ask, Hazuki-kun? Planning to take the stage yourself?”

Yuu met his gaze, a faint grin tugging at his lips. “That’s a secret.”

Just then, the rooftop door creaked open again.

A voice—bright, unmistakably confident—cut through the lazy hum of the wind.

“Huh? If it isn’t Hazuki-kun!”

Yuu turned toward the sound, blinking at the sight of short, scruffy blonde hair tipped in peach—its owner standing tall, radiating an energy that practically gleamed beneath the sun.

Tsukasa Tenma.

“Tsukasa-senpai,” Yuu greeted, a hint of surprise in his tone. “What are you doing here?”

“Ah! I’m here for Rui!” Tsukasa declared proudly, one hand planted on his hip like an actor taking center stage.

“For me?” Rui blinked, head tilting.

“Yeah! We have to plan for the upcoming play! Nene gave me a few inspirations!”

Rui’s expression softened into amusement. “Really now?”

“Yeah! Yeah!” Tsukasa’s enthusiasm was unrelenting, his grin as bright as the sky behind him.

“That’s great,” Yuu said, managing a small smile at the sheer energy radiating from his senpai.

“Of course it’s great! Now come along, Rui!” Tsukasa exclaimed, already grabbing Rui by the wrist and half-dragging him toward the door. Then, just as quickly, he stopped and turned back, flashing Yuu a dramatic wink. “Ah—sorry about this, Hazuki-kun! Duty calls!~”

And with that, the two vanished through the rooftop door in a whirl of motion and chatter.

The quiet returned just as swiftly as it had left.

Yuu stood there for a moment, watching the door swing shut. Then, with a soft exhale, he turned his gaze back toward the skyline.

The afternoon breeze brushed gently against his hair and coat, carrying the scent of sun-warmed concrete and distant city air.

“Huh…” he murmured, a faint, weary smile touching his lips.

“Are you nervous?”

The sudden voice made Yuu glance down. His smartwatch flickered to life, projecting a soft blue light that shimmered in the air before taking shape.

KAITO—Vivid BAD SQUAD’s version—materialized in miniature, arms crossed and a lazy grin tugging at his lips.

“You were listening, weren't you?

“Well, I was bored,” KAITO admitted, stretching as if to emphasize his point. “There’s not much to do when you’re just lying around in the Sekai. MEIKO keeps scolding me, says I should do something productive."

“You’re carefree to the point of laziness while MEIKO works at the café, huh?”

“Hey, I call it conserving energy,” KAITO shot back with a grin. “Besides, I am being productive right now—checking in on you.”

In the game, KAITO is an excellent DJ. Len and Rin take DJ lessons from him. He appears as part of the SEKAI in the "STRAY BAD DOG" event story.

Yuu smirked faintly, shaking his head. “If you say so.”

KAITO’s holographic form flickered slightly, his expression softening. “Still… you’re thinking a lot aren't you?"

“…Maybe.”

“Then that’s fine,” KAITO said, his voice lowering to something gentler. “Means you’re still human enough to feel nervous.”

KAITO’s image hovered just above his wrist, flickering faintly in the fading light. “You’ve been pushing yourself pretty hard lately,” he said. “Practicing, observing, thinking. It’s not bad to take a moment to admit it’s scary.”

“Scary?” Yuu repeated, leaning back against the wall. His gaze drifted to the sky, painted gold and crimson by the sunset. “It’s not really fear. Just… the thought of stepping into something I don’t belong in.”

KAITO tilted his head, studying him with a calm, almost knowing expression. “You mean the stage?”

“…Yeah.”

The hologram smiled faintly. “You sound like An when she first started. Or Kohane, when she thought her voice didn’t fit the street scene.”

“That’s different,” Yuu said quietly. “They were meant to be there. I wasn’t.”

“Meant to be?” KAITO echoed, folding his arms. “You really think anyone starts that way? You think Akito was born rapping or Toya just woke up with rhythm in his veins? Hazuki. The difference is whether you stop there or keep moving forward.”

Yuu blinked, recalling Ken’s words from earlier—You’re going to be their pawn.

“Funny,” he muttered under his breath. “Mr. Ken said something similar."

“Then maybe he’s right.” KAITO’s smile widened, not teasing this time, but encouraging. “Fear, doubt, not belonging… those are all part of the beat. You just have to find the rhythm that’s yours.”

Yuu looked down at his reflection in the smartwatch’s dark glass, KAITO’s flickering form overlaying his own face. “My rhythm, huh…”

“Yeah,” KAITO said simply. “You’ll find it soon enough. Maybe not today. But when you do—you’ll know it’s you.”

The hologram gave a small, two-fingered salute before fading out, leaving only the quiet hum of the city and the last blush of sunlight across the rooftop.

Yuu stood there for a moment longer, the words lingering like an afterimage.

“…My rhythm.”

Yuu’s fingers brushed against the edge of his smartwatch, eyes still fixed on where KAITO’s hologram had been moments ago.

“Then…” he murmured, his voice almost lost beneath the sigh of the wind.

“Then maybe… I’ll keep moving,” he said quietly. “Even if I’m just a pawn for now.”

“Because even pawns…” Yuu’s lips curved into a small, determined smile, “…can reach the other side.”

The breeze caught his hair as he turned, stepping through the rooftop door and descending the stairwell—one slow, echoing footstep at a time.

Just then, a flicker of blue light shimmered before Yuu’s eyes.

A hologram unfolded midair, its faint hum blending with the whisper of the wind.

[Upcoming Maintenance Update]
Due to the version of the game not getting an update, we will be forcing the updated version in 2 days.

Yuu froze.

“Huh?” he muttered under his breath, eyes narrowing as he read the message again. “Wait… if an update happens…”

His thoughts tangled. The air seemed heavier somehow, static brushing against his skin.

“…then that means there’s gonna be new patches coming.”

He stood there for a moment—just staring at the floating text. The words pulsed faintly, as if aware of his hesitation.

Then, with a flick of his hand, he swiped the hologram away. It dissolved into particles of light, leaving the rooftop silent once more.

“…Whatever,” he murmured, tucking his hands into his pockets as he turned toward the stairwell. “I’ll see what happens.”

“What happens?”

The sudden voice nearly made Yuu jump out of his skin. He spun around.

Standing a few steps behind him was Akito, hands shoved into his pockets, an unimpressed look plastered on his face.

“Shinonome-san, don’t give me a heart attack like that,” Yuu sighed, hand pressed against his chest.

Akito raised an eyebrow. “Nothing, I was just looking for you. Well, An and Toya were looking for you, so we started searching around.”

“Huh? Oh…” Yuu blinked, still trying to calm the thudding in his chest.

“So?” Akito asked, his gaze narrowing slightly. “What happened?”

“Huh? Nothing, nothing,” Yuu said quickly, waving his hands in front of him.

Akito stared at him for a moment, clearly unconvinced. “Hmm.” His tone carried suspicion, but he didn’t push further.

He exhaled through his nose and shrugged. “Oh well. If you’ve got any problems, just so you know…” He glanced aside, voice lowering awkwardly. “We… we’re always here.”

Yuu blinked, taken aback. Then, a small, quiet smile tugged at his lips.

“…Creepy.”

“Wha—what do you mean creepy?!” Akito’s voice jumped an octave as his face twisted in disbelief. “I’m being a good friend here!”

“Right,” Yuu said simply, fighting the urge to laugh.

“You…!” Akito pointed a finger, somewhere between exasperation and amusement.

Yuu turned toward the stairwell, waving him along. “Let’s go.”

Akito huffed, muttering something under his breath as he followed, their footsteps fading together down the rooftop stairs.

“There you are,” Toya said, crossing his arms. “You suddenly went off as soon as the lunch bell rang.”

“Yeah, sorry,” Yuu replied, scratching his cheek with an awkward smile.

An leaned forward. “Where’d you find him?” she asked Akito.

“Near the rooftop entrance, by the stairs,” Akito answered, glancing at Yuu. “He was just standing there, zoning out or something.”

An blinked, then frowned slightly. “What were you doing up there?”

“Believe it or not,” Yuu said, forcing a small laugh, “I was watching Vivid BAD SQUAD’s performance.”

The excuse slipped out smoothly than he expected. For a second, he thought they might see through it—but instead, An’s eyes widened in surprise.

“Really? You should’ve told us!” she said, hands on her hips, a grin already forming. “We could’ve joined you!”

Toya nodded, half-smiling. “It does sound like something you’d do.”

“Right? Always sneaking off."

“Now, now,” Yuu said, raising a hand in mock surrender, a teasing smile tugging at his lips. “Let’s just head back to class. Lunch break’s about to end anyway.”

An groaned, her shoulders slumping as she dramatically dragged her feet. “Ugh, already? But I just started eating!” She pointed an accusatory finger at Yuu, eyes narrowing. “It’s your fault, Yuu!”

“Eh? Me?” Yuu blinked, genuinely baffled. “Why me?”

“Because we were looking for you!” An huffed, puffing out her cheeks as if the logic was perfectly sound.

Akito rolled his eyes. “You were the one who insisted we had to find him before lunch ended, remember?”

“Shut up!” An shot back, glaring at him before turning to Yuu again. “Still your fault!”

Toya chuckled softly, hands tucked in his pockets as he followed behind. “You really can’t win with her, Hazuki.”

“Yeah,” Yuu sighed in mock defeat, scratching the back of his neck. “I’m starting to realize that.”

An smirked triumphantly. “Good! As long as you know!”

The group laughed as they made their way down the corridor, the bell chiming faintly in the distance.

The noise of students rushing back to their rooms filled the air, yet amidst the chatter and footsteps, Yuu felt something quietly warm, something that felt almost like belonging.

Chapter 49: Between Shifts and Steps

After school, Yuu packed his things and waved a short goodbye to Akito and the others before heading off. The late afternoon sun stretched across the streets of Shibuya, painting the buildings in gold and amber.

“Another day… another shift.”

Yuu arrived at the office where MORE MORE JUMP! gathered.

His job wasn’t glamorous, checking schedules, preparing water bottles, arranging costumes—but he handled it efficiently.

Haruka was studying the schedule.

“You’re earlier than usual, Hazuki-kun.”

“The teacher let us out a bit early today,” Yuu replied.

Airi leaned over the counter.

“Don’t work too hard! You’ll tire yourself out before you even get to dance practice.”

“I’ll be fine,” he said, smiling faintly.

Minori was humming softly in the background while organizing props, and Shizuku accidentally tangled her mic cable again, prompting a soft laugh from everyone.

After his shift ended, Yuu stayed behind at the studio, switching the lights to practice mode.

He placed his phone by the wall, music cued, and began to move—his steps careful at first, then sharper, more fluid.

Each motion mirrored what he had seen from Toya and Akito, the flow of rhythm running through his veins.

The glass panels reflected his movements, hesitant, then confident.

He didn’t notice at first, but at some point, the door slid open slightly.

“He’s at it again,” whispered Airi.

“He’s getting better,” Haruka said softly, crossing her arms.

“His rhythm matches Vivid BAD SQUAD’s style,” Minori added, eyes wide.

“He works so hard, even after all this,” Shizuku murmured. “He really loves the stage.”

They didn’t disturb him. They simply watched—seeing the faint glow of the boy who kept pushing himself beyond the background.

Yuu stopped, breathing heavily, sweat trailing down his temple.

He turned to the mirror, catching his own reflection.

"...Just a little more," he muttered. "I'm not there yet."

He picked up his phone, replayed the recording of his steps, then adjusted his stance again.

The music restarted.

He moved again.

[MORE MORE JUMP!'s perspective]

"Hey, guys, why are we still here?" Airi asked, tilting her head as she peeked through the small glass window of the studio door.

The others stood beside her, half-hidden in the dim corridor.

Inside, Yuu was still moving, his steps steady, breath synchronized with the beat echoing through the room.

Minori pressed a finger to her lips. "Shh… look. He's still practicing."

Haruka's eyes softened as she leaned slightly against the wall, watching the boy's reflection in the mirror. "He's been at it since we finished rehearsal… hasn't even noticed us."

"Geez," Airi muttered, though a small grin tugged at her lips. "He's going to collapse if he keeps this up."

Shizuku chuckled quietly. "Maybe… but look at him. He doesn't seem tired at all."

The studio lights caught faint trails of dust swirling around Yuu as he spun, then stopped abruptly, panting, but smiling faintly to himself.

Airi crossed her arms. "What's he even trying to do, anyway?"

"Improve," Haruka said simply. "Little by little. Every time we see him, his rhythm gets sharper."

Minori's eyes gleamed. "He's amazing, isn't he? It's like… he's dancing because he really wants to, not because someone told him to."

For a moment, the four idols stood in silence—just watching. The faint sound of sneakers against the polished floor echoed like a heartbeat.

Finally, Airi sighed, whispering under her breath, "He's hopeless."

But there was no bite in her words—only warmth.

Then, Haruka straightened and turned toward the hall. "Come on. Let's not distract him."

As they walked away, Airi glanced back one last time through the window.

Yuu was still there—alone, but glowing under the studio lights, chasing something unseen beyond the mirror's reflection.

And then... going back to Yuu's perspective...

...

They're finally gone.

Yuu exhaled, his shoulders slumping as the door clicked shut behind the last of the MORE MORE JUMP members. The echo of their footsteps faded down the hall, leaving behind only the faint hum of the studio lights and the steady thrum of his own heartbeat.

He wiped a bead of sweat from his temple and chuckled under his breath. "They really are a handful, huh…"

As if answering his words, a faint chime came from his wrist. A soft light flickered to life on his smartwatch, and a familiar voice chimed in—bright, teasing, and unmistakably cheerful.

"Handful? That's rude, you know!"

A holographic figure materialized above the device.

short yellow hair, blue eyes sparkling with mischief.

The Kagamine Rin of MORE MORE JUMP (Stage Sekai).

Yuu smiled faintly, unclasping the watch and setting it on the floor beside him. The hologram adjusted, the projection leveling so that Rin stood eye-to-eye with him in miniature form. Her digital hair swayed as though caught in the same gentle air of the studio.

"Better?" she asked, hands on her hips, her grin widening.

"Yeah," Yuu said, stretching his arms behind his head. "Now we're on the same level."

"Are you nervous?" Rin asked, her voice softening.

Yuu glanced at her projection, a small smile tugging at the corner of his lips. "Yeah, kinda…" he admitted, his tone quiet but honest. "But I'm practicing more and more so I won't fail."

Rin's expression softened—less teasing now, more like quiet encouragement. She floated a little closer, the hologram's faint glow brushing against his wrist like warmth from a lamp.

"That's the spirit," she said with a grin that carried her usual brightness. "MORE MORE JUMP would say—don't stop here. You've gotta shine more and more, right?"

Yuu let out a short laugh, lowering his gaze to the polished studio floor that reflected her glowing form. "Heh… yeah. Guess that's your motto, huh?"

"Mm-hmm!" Rin nodded proudly, placing her hands on her hips. "And soon, it'll be yours too."

"She's right…" Yuu murmured, his voice low as he lifted his hand.

With a smooth swipe through the air, a familiar light-blue interface flickered into existence before him—the Project Sekai menu, its geometric icons and holographic glow painting his face in faint cyan.

Lines of data scrolled across the virtual space, leading to one section he knew by heart: the Skill Tree.

Each node shimmered faintly, waiting for his touch, each upgrade representing the countless hours he'd poured into becoming better.

Rin floated beside him, crossing her arms with an exaggerated sigh. "You and your cheating system," she said, though her tone carried more amusement than reproach.

Yuu chuckled under his breath, tapping one of the glowing nodes as a cascade of light rippled through the projection. "Haha… maybe," he admitted. "But even if it's cheating, I still have to earn it."

Rin tilted her head, smiling faintly. "That's very you."

The rhythmic echo of Yuu's footsteps was the only sound that filled the empty hallway as he flicked off the final light in the dance studio.

The room, once alive with music and motion, fell into stillness, its mirrors now reflecting only the dim afterglow of the ceiling lamps.

He slung his bag over his shoulder, the faint jingle of his keychain breaking the silence.

After double-checking the lock on the door, he exhaled softly. "All secure," he murmured to himself.

Outside, the night air greeted him with a cool whisper. The MORE MORE JUMP! agency stood quietly behind him, its neon sign faintly flickering against the dark sky.

Yuu stretched his arms above his head, a small yawn escaping as the tension left his body.

"That was tiring…" he muttered, rolling his shoulders before starting down the dimly lit street.

The city around him was hushed, save for the occasional hum of passing cars and the rustle of wind through narrow alleys. He walked in quiet thought—until something made him stop.

"Huh?"

A few paces ahead, beneath the soft orange glow of a streetlamp, stood a small group. Four familiar figures—faces from two very different worlds.

"Mizuki-san… and Shinonome-san," Yuu said, blinking in mild surprise. Then his gaze shifted to the other two, and his posture straightened. "Ah… This is probably our first actual greeting in the real world." He bowed politely. "Asahina-san, Yoisaki-san."

Mafuyu mirrored his gesture, her tone calm yet gentle. "Good evening."

Beside her, Kanade followed with a small, quiet nod, her pale hair catching the light like moonlit silk. Mizuki waved casually, while Ena crossed her arms, a hint of curiosity in her eyes as they all stood together.

The faint hum of the city lights shimmered against the quiet rhythm of their voices.

“What are you doing here, Yuu-kun?” Mizuki asked first, tilting their head, the playful lilt in their tone impossible to miss.

“Huh? Me?” Yuu blinked, scratching the back of his neck. “I was about to go home.”

“Oh?” Mizuki’s lips curved into a teasing grin. “Did you come home from a date?”

Yuu chuckled softly, waving a hand. “Haha, nope…”

“Ehh~ what’s with that answer? How boring,” Mizuki pouted dramatically.

“It’s because that’s the truth,” Ena interjected flatly, arms crossed as her sharp eyes flicked toward Yuu. “I’m surprised you’re not with Akito.”

“Ahh… I think he’s with Aoyagi-kun,” Yuu replied, glancing away.

His gaze drifted toward Mafuyu.

She’s showing her real face around me, Yuu thought, startled by the subtle warmth. I thought she’d still be hiding behind that ‘good-girl’ act.

“So, what are you four doing out this late?” he asked, breaking the silence.

Mizuki clasped their hands behind their back, We were just about to go home too! We went to a family restaurant after celebrating a finished song!”

“Ehh… can I listen to it?”

“Sure~!” Mizuki chimed. “I’ll send it to you via LINE.”

“Mmm.” Yuu nodded, a small smile tugging at his lips.

So she's not sending me via Nightcord, huh...

Before he could say more, Kanade spoke up softly, her voice barely above the hum of passing cars. “I want to hear your thoughts.”

Yuu’s eyes widened slightly, caught off guard.

So… she really made the song herself, huh?

A grin tugged at his mouth. “Of course,” he said, a spark of genuine excitement in his tone. “I’ll send my reaction to Mizuki-san.”

Kanade’s faint smile deepened by a fraction—quiet, fleeting, but real.

“Man, it’s colder than I thought…” Mizuki muttered, tugging the drawstrings of their oversized hoodie until only their nose peeked out. Their breath fogged in the crisp night air as they stomped their feet for warmth. “Why does inspiration always strike in winter?!”

Yuu chuckled softly, “December’s almost here, after all.”

“Yeah, yeah,” Mizuki sighed dramatically, rubbing their hands together. “Still doesn’t make it fair. My creativity shouldn’t come with frostbite.”

Ena rolled her eyes, exhaling through her scarf. “You could just… wear something thicker.”

“I am wearing something thicker!” Mizuki shot back. “It’s called fashion, Ena!"

Kanade’s quiet laughter drifted between them—soft, barely there, but warm enough to cut through the chill.

Even Mafuyu’s gaze softened, watching them bicker under the pale glow of the streetlight.

With that, their paths finally diverged.

The soft chorus of “goodnight” and “see you soon” faded into the hum of the city as the four girls turned toward the station, their silhouettes shrinking beneath the pale wash of streetlights. Mizuki waved until the last second, her laughter echoing faintly before the sound was swallowed by the wind.

And then—silence.

Yuu stood there for a moment, watching their figures disappear into the crowd. The cold nipped gently at his fingers as he exhaled, his breath rising in a thin trail of white.

When he finally began to walk again, his footsteps were the only sound left on the quiet street. The world felt still—empty, yet alive. Neon lights flickered in puddles, the faint rumble of distant traffic blending with the rustle of winter leaves.

“…December, huh."

“It’s almost December…”

Yuu’s voice barely stirred the air, swallowed quickly by the whispering wind. His breath rose in a pale wisp before vanishing into the night, leaving only the muted sound of his footsteps on cold asphalt.

The city around him had quieted—shop shutters half-lowered, streetlights humming softly, the world sinking into the stillness of winter’s edge.

By the time he reached home, the neighborhood was wrapped in a hush. The wooden door gave its familiar creak as he slid it open, letting a faint glow spill across the entryway. Warm air met his skin, carrying with it the faint scent of laundry detergent and simmered broth.

“I’m home,” he murmured, his voice breaking the quiet.

“Ara? Welcome home,” came his mother’s gentle reply from the kitchen. “You’re late. Your dinner’s on the table—just reheat it in the microwave.”

“Kay~,” he answered softly. “I’ll go change first.”

He climbed the short steps to his room, the floorboards creaking beneath his socks. The space greeted him the same way it always did—neat, unassuming, frozen in time. He set his bag down by the desk and reached for a change of clothes, the rustle of fabric echoing in the silence.

As he passed by the mirror, something tugged at him.

He paused.

His reflection stared back—a face shaped by countless routines, framed by hair slightly disheveled from the wind. A face that should’ve been familiar.

And yet… it wasn’t.

“…I don’t remember my college face anymore,” he whispered.

[Flashback — College Days | Third Year, Biology Department]

The midday sun filtered lazily through the tall classroom windows, catching dust motes that danced in the air. The hum of students chatting over lunch filled the biology lab, cluttered with glass beakers, textbooks, and the faint scent of ethanol.

“Huh? You’re introducing me to a rhythm game?” Yuu asked, leaning back in his chair with a skeptical frown. “Look, I already have plenty of games in my hands.”

His friend, grinning like a salesman on commission, shoved a phone toward him. “Ehh? Trust me! It’s really good! Look at this—Project SEKAI!”

Yuu squinted at the screen. The vibrant title screen glowed back at him, filled with pastel colors and cheerful characters. “Huh? Isn’t this just Bandori in a nutshell?”

“...You’re a f***ing idiot,” his friend groaned, flicking Yuu on the forehead. “Bandori’s from Bushiroad, while Project SEKAI’s from SEGA.”

“I heard the writing and dev teams for Project SEKAI originated from Craft Egg…” Yuu muttered, only half listening as he scrolled through the menu.

“Anyway!” his friend pressed on, grinning from ear to ear. “At least give it a try! I’ll pay you 5,000 yen.”

Yuu blinked, narrowing his eyes. “Be honest with me. You just want me to clear a stage you can’t beat, don’t you?”

“Teehee~.”

He sighed, long and slow, dragging a hand down his face. “Fine. Let me at least warm up first…”

“Really?! SWEET!” his friend cheered, already shoving the phone into Yuu’s hands.

[Flashback End]

The memory dissolved like dust caught in light.

Back in the quiet of his room, Yuu let out a dry laugh that barely reached his eyes. “Hah… what am I doing?”

He stepped out of his room, the faint blue glow of his monitor fading behind him as he wandered into the kitchen. The house was quiet—only the rhythmic hum of the refrigerator and the distant ticking of the wall clock filled the space. He opened the microwave, slid in a plate of leftovers, and pressed a few buttons.

The soft whir of the microwave filled the silence.

“Hm? Yuu…” His mother’s voice came from behind him, gentle yet observant. She stood by the counter, arms crossed, a faint smile playing on her lips. “Is it just me, or are you getting taller?”

“Huh? Ah…” Yuu glanced down at himself, then shrugged lightly. “I guess I am?”

She hummed, tilting her head. “Hmmm~ Do you have something in mind for your career?”

He blinked. “Mom?”

“I didn’t mean to pry,” she said, her tone softening. “I just… want to know what you’re planning to do in the future.”

The future, huh…

He leaned against the counter, watching the plate spin inside the microwave.

I could go for Biology again, he thought, since I already know the material… but…

The timer beeped, snapping him from his thoughts. He took out the warm plate and smiled faintly, almost to himself.

“I’ll think about it.”

His mother nodded quietly, returning the smile.

“I see,” his mother said with a teasing lilt, folding her arms as she leaned against the counter. “Then it’s good to focus on the present after all…” Her eyes glimmered mischievously. “So? When are you getting a girlfriend?”

Yuu froze mid-bite, his chopsticks hovering in the air. “…Mom.”

“What?” she replied innocently, though the grin tugging at her lips betrayed her. “Don’t tell me you plan to be alone for the rest of your life.”

“Obviously, Mom, I’m not.”

“Hmmm~ Then you’d better introduce me to that lucky girl someday.”

He sighed, lowering his chopsticks with a tired smile. “Right…”

As she chuckled softly to herself, Yuu looked away, watching the microwave clock tick over to the next minute.

Wow… kinda pain in the ass… he thought, though there was a faint warmth hidden behind the exasperation—a comfort he wouldn't admit out loud.

After finishing his meal and washing the dishes, Yuu retreated to his room, the soft creak of the door closing behind him. The faint hum of the computer filled the quiet as he sat down, the glow of the monitor painting his face in pale blue light.

He unlocked his phone, opening LINE. A new message notification blinked at the top of the chat—Mizuki had already sent the link.

He tapped it.

"…Oh," Yuu murmured, leaning back against his chair as the intro swelled. "It's this song."

"I Nandesu…" Yuu whispered the title under his breath as the lyrics began to unfold. The rhythm was steady yet fragile, like a heartbeat trying to find its pace.

The words carried weight—softly questioning, quietly aching.

"A song about… identity," he murmured, eyes narrowing as he listened closer. "Self-acceptance… and the struggle to be one's true self."

The chorus rose, raw and honest. For a moment, the walls of his room seemed to fade, leaving only the sound and the feeling behind it.

"…Figures it'd be them," Yuu muttered, a faint smile tugging at his lips. "Only 25-ji could turn something that painful into something that beautiful."

He reached for his phone, the glow of the screen cutting through the dim room. The song had just ended, leaving behind a silence that felt heavier than before.

Yuu opened LINE and scrolled to Mizuki's chat. For a moment, he just stared at the blinking cursor—trying to put the emotions into words.

Yuu: "Just finished listening."

He paused, then continued typing slowly.

Yuu: "It's… honest. Like it's not trying to say what people want to hear, but what someone needs to, the lyrics hit pretty deep. It feels like… trying to remember who you are, even when you've forgotten."

He reread the message, thumb hovering over send.

Yuu: "It's a really beautiful song, Mizuki-san. Tell Kanade-san I said that too."

Send.

He sighed, leaning back against his chair as the gentle ping of the sent message faded.

The night stretched on in calm silence. The hum of the heater, the faint rustle of wind beyond the curtains—everything blended into a gentle lull that carried him toward sleep.

Tomorrow, everything would move again.

But for now… Yuu simply let the stillness hold him.

Chapter 50: The Beat That Connects Us

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

Morning sunlight slipped gently through the thin curtains, painting faint gold across the room. Yuu's phone buzzed against the nightstand, the alarm tone breaking through the still hush of dawn.

With a quiet groan, he reached out, silencing it with a practiced tap before sitting up.

His hair was a mess, tufts of black falling over his tired eyes as he blinked blearily at the glowing screen.

A new notification blinked.
[An: Yuu! Good morning! It's time! Are you excited?]

"…That was fast," Yuu muttered, voice rough with sleep. "She woke up early."

He chuckled under his breath as he typed a reply, the soft clicks echoing in the stillness.

[Yuu: After school, right? Yes, yes… I'm excited.]

The message was sent with a faint whoosh.

Almost immediately, the familiar typing… bubble appeared.

[An: You don't sound excited. Did I wake you up? Don't tell me you're not a morning person?]

Yuu sighed through a small smile, swinging his legs off the bed. The wooden floor felt cold against his bare feet as he typed back, still half in a daze.

[Yuu: I'm a morning person, actually… Anyway, I'm going to prepare myself for school.]

A few seconds later, the reply came with a cheerful ping.

[An: Alright! See you later! 🐱👍]

The tiny cat emoji seemed to beam at him from the screen.

Yuu smiled faintly, the warmth of anticipation stirring beneath the morning chill.

"Yeah… see you later."

As soon as Yuu stepped out of his room, the faint aroma of toasted bread and coffee greeted him. The morning light filtered through the curtains of the kitchen, painting soft streaks of warmth across the counter where his mother stood, humming quietly to herself.

"Morning," Yuu said, rubbing the back of his neck.

"Morning, Yuu…" she replied, turning to face him—then pausing mid-motion. Her brow lifted. "What's wrong with you? Grinning like that?"

“Huh? Grinning?” He blinked in confusion, touching his cheek instinctively.

“Yeah, you’re smiling,” she said, narrowing her eyes slightly, though a hint of amusement tugged at her lips.

“Ah… really?”

Her expression softened into mild surprise, as though she hadn’t seen that smile in a while.
“Anyway,” she said at last, turning back to the counter, “eat your breakfast.”

“Yeah. Thanks, Mom.”

Yuu sat down, still smiling faintly without even realizing it—his thoughts already drifting ahead to the performance waiting after school.

After breakfast, Yuu packed his things with quiet precision—the soft rustle of fabric and the metallic click of zippers filling the air of his room.

He folded his performance outfit neatly into a smaller bag, carefully placing his shoes and a few chosen accessories beside it. It felt strange—exciting, almost—to prepare for something that wasn’t just another school day.

Once everything was in place, he slung both bags over his shoulder, gave the room a quick glance, and stepped out into the crisp morning air. The sun had just climbed over the rooftops, brushing the streets with a soft golden hue.

By the time he reached the gates of Kamiyama High, the usual rhythm of chatter and footsteps surrounded him. Students streamed in pairs and clusters, their laughter carried by the wind.

And there—just ahead—he spotted Toya and Akito walking side by side, talking casually.

A small, genuine smile tugged at Yuu’s lips as he walked toward them.
“Good morning, you two.”

“Good morning,” Toya replied, his calm tone as even as ever.

“Yo, good morning,” Akito greeted, slinging his bag higher on his shoulder.

“Hazuki-kun, you seem excited,” Toya remarked, his voice calm but with a faint note of amusement.

Yuu nodded, unable to suppress the grin tugging at his face. “Yeah. It’s my first performance, after all.”

Akito gave a short snort, “You really need to turn that energy down a bit. It’ll be a waste if you burn it all out before we even start.”

“Really?”

“Yeah, Akito’s right,” Toya agreed, glancing at him sidelong. “You’ll need that energy on stage more than now.”

Yuu hummed thoughtfully, a playful tone slipping into his voice. “Hmm~ Akito-kun, you’re kinda scary when it comes to performing, huh…”

“Ha?” Akito shot him a sharp glare, his brows furrowing. “What’s that supposed to mean?”

Before Yuu could answer, Toya gave a quiet sigh, the corners of his mouth curving slightly. “Don’t pay attention to it, Hazuki-kun. He gets like that.”

Yuu couldn’t help it—he laughed, the sound light and genuine.

The morning air felt easier somehow, carried by their banter.

Then, as the morning drifted on, the three parted ways—Akito heading down the hall toward Class 1-C, while Yuu and Toya went to their own classroom.

Lessons passed in their usual rhythm: the drone of lectures, the scratching of pens, and the faint hum of conversations between desks. Yet, for Yuu, every minute felt stretched thin by anticipation. The thought of the performance hovered at the back of his mind, pulsing like a quiet beat only he could hear.

By the time lunch arrived, he could finally breathe again.

“Hazuki-kun, are you going to the cafeteria?"

"Yeah."

"I'll come with you."

Yuu nodded, and the two slipped out of the classroom together.

The hallway was already alive with chatter and laughter, sunlight spilling through the windows and scattering gold across the floor.

“Oh? You two!”

A familiar voice called out.

An waved from a few steps away, her smile bright as always. Beside her stood Mizuki.

“It’s An and Akiyama,” Toya noted, and both he and Yuu lifted their hands in greeting.

“Hey, Yuu-kun,” Mizuki teased, bumping him lightly with their elbow. “I heard from An that you’re performing with them.”

Yuu chuckled, rubbing the back of his neck. “Haha… yeah, that’s true.”

“Oooh~ So today’s the big day,” Mizuki said, their tone half-teasing, half impressed. “Try not to trip on stage, okay?”

“I’ll make sure not to,” Yuu replied, smiling despite himself.

“Then I’ll invite everyone in 25-ji!” Mizuki announced suddenly, snapping their fingers with a grin.

An’s eyes lit up. “That sounds good!”

Toya sighed softly beside Yuu, crossing his arms. “You’re giving Hazuki-kun some pressure, you know?”

Huh? Wait… did 25-ji and Vivid BAD SQUAD already know each other’s performance schedules? Eh… whatever.< Yuu muttered inwardly, suppressing a small smile.

“Why not?” An said brightly, leaning forward with her usual boundless energy. “It’s more fun when there’s a crowd! The more the merrier!”

“It’s fine, Aoyagi-kun,” Yuu reassured, waving off Toya’s concern.

Before anyone could say more, a familiar voice called from down the hall.

“Yo, sorry to make you wait.”

Akito strode toward them, one hand in his pocket, “Is it just me, or do we always end up gathered together?”

“Isn’t it great, otouto-kun?” Mizuki teased, resting a hand dramatically on their cheek.

“I told you not to call me that,” Akito snapped back, face tightening with mild irritation that only made Mizuki laugh harder.

The small group dissolved into easy chatter and laughter as they made their way to their usual spot in the cafeteria. The lunchtime buzz surrounded them—clinking trays, echoing voices, the warmth of the midday sun filtering through the windows.

They ate together, joked together, and for a moment, the performance ahead felt like a distant thought.

Then, as the day stretched on, the laughter gave way to the quiet rhythm of afternoon lectures.

...

And finally—

Riiiiing!

The final bell chimed, clear and resonant, signaling the end of their last subject.

The real part of the day was about to begin.

“Let’s go,” Toya said, slinging his bag over his shoulder with his usual calm precision. “We’ll wait for Kohane, An, and Akito at the school gate.”

“Azusawa-san too?” Yuu asked, adjusting the strap of his own bag.

Toya nodded. “Yeah. She’ll meet us there.”

Without another word, the two started down the hallway together. Afternoon light filtered through the tall windows, spilling long golden bands across the floor as the murmur of students faded into the distance.

“Are you nervous?” Toya asked suddenly.

“Huh? Me?” Yuu scratched the back of his neck with a sheepish laugh. “Don’t say that. If I think about it too much, I’ll break down before we even start.”

Toya stopped walking, prompting Yuu to do the same.

“Then I have a tip for you.”

“A tip?” Yuu tilted his head.

Toya exhaled softly, his tone calm but steady. “You don’t have to worry about your performance itself. Instead, focus on what you’ve been doing until now.”

Yuu blinked, trying to catch up to the meaning.

“In other words,” Toya continued, his gaze steady, “trust the work you’ve already put in. You’ve practiced, trained, and prepared—so there’s no reason to let nerves take over now.”

For a moment, the hallway went still. Dust motes floated lazily in the sunlight, and Yuu found himself staring at Toya, the words sinking in deeper than he expected.

Then Toya turned, walking forward again. “Come on,” he said.

Yuu smiled faintly. “Haha… so you can say things like that, huh.”

“Obviously.”

By the time they reached the school gate, the afternoon glow had softened into the gold of early evening. The faint wind carried the distant sounds of club activities—shouts, laughter, the rhythmic thud of a basketball.

A familiar voice called out. “Hello, Toya, Hazuki-kun! Did you two wait long?”

Kohane approached, her bag bouncing lightly against her shoulder.

“Hello, Azusawa-san,” Yuu greeted. Toya nodded beside him.

“We just got here,” Toya said. “An had a disciplinary committee meeting, so Akito’s waiting for her.”

“I see…” Kohane smiled, then turned to Yuu. “I’m excited to perform with you, Hazuki-kun.”

Yuu grinned. “So am I. Just make sure to cover for my mistakes, okay?”

Kohane laughed softly. “Haha… I should be saying the same thing.”

Moments later, a familiar burst of energy broke the calm.

“Sorry! The disciplinary meeting took longer than expected!” An waved as she ran up, her hair catching the light.

“And I was waiting for her,” Akito added, with a resigned sigh.

An straightened up, glancing at the group. “Looks like everyone’s here, huh?” Her lips curled into a determined smile. “Then—let’s go! We’ve got a street to shine tonight!”

“Yeah!”

Their voices rose together in unison.

The group’s footsteps echoed softly down the narrow alleyways off Shibuya’s Center-Gai as dusk settled around them. Neon signs flickered to life, and the scent of street food drifted through the air—an undercurrent of everyday Tokyo energy.

An led the way, with Yuu, Toya, Akito, and Kohane following in relaxed formation, their performance gear tucked in bags slung over their shoulders.

They turned into a small side street and stopped before the entrance of WWW SHIBUYA, the live house’s black façade and bold white lettering glowing in the twilight.

“Here we are,” An said, her tone brisk but tinged with excitement. “Our stage tonight.”

Yuu paused on the step, breathing in the mixture of crisp night air and rising anticipation. The little bag containing his outfit and shoes suddenly felt heavier than before.

Toya placed a hand on his shoulder. “Ready?” he asked quietly.

Yuu met his gaze and nodded. “Yeah.”

Akito crossed his arms, a small grin tugging at his lips. “Good. Let’s make sure we give them something unforgettable.”

Kohane smiled softly at Yuu. “Let’s give it our all, okay?”

“Right,” Yuu said, his voice firm despite the quickening beat of his heart. He looked at the door once more before turning to the group. “Then… shall we get changed?”

They pushed through the heavy door, and a wave of sound hit them—bass vibrating through the floor, voices overlapping, the faint hiss of a fog machine somewhere deeper inside.

The interior of WWW SHIBUYA was dim, lit by stage lights in shifting colors that bled into the walls. Staff hurried past with clipboards and coiled cables, the air thick with the hum of preparation.

A staff member looked up from a console, recognizing An immediately. “Ah, Vivid BAD SQUAD—perfect timing! You’re up next after the current act. Dressing room’s the second door on the right!”

“Got it, thanks!” An replied with her usual confidence, waving for the others to follow. “Come on, let’s hurry.”

They moved quickly down the narrow hallway. The muffled beat of the live performance on stage pulsed through the walls—steady, rhythmic, almost like a heartbeat.

When they entered the dressing room, the fluorescent lights buzzed faintly overhead. A row of mirrors lined one wall, each framed by small white bulbs that flickered occasionally.

“Whew, talk about atmosphere,” Yuu murmured.

“That’s true,” Toya replied, setting down his bag.

“Now, now—let’s change into our unit attire, yeah?” An said, tugging Kohane toward the adjoining changing room while Akito, Toya, and Yuu went to theirs.

A few minutes later, they stepped out one by one, each wearing the colors and style that defined Vivid BAD SQUAD.

“Mmm… everyone looks good!” An said approvingly, hands on her hips. “Especially you, Yuu-kun—it really fits you. You look like part of Vivid BAD SQUAD.”

Yuu glanced down at himself, the outfit recalling the one Ichika had helped him pick out during that mall trip. He smiled faintly. “Thanks.”

The muffled thump of the bass outside grew louder, shaking faintly through the floorboards. An adjusted her gloves, Akito tightened the strap on his headset, and Toya exhaled quietly, rolling his shoulders.

Someone from the staff cracked the door open. “Vivid BAD SQUAD, standby. You’re next.”

“Alright,” An said, her voice steady. “Everyone ready?”

Kohane nodded firmly. Akito gave a thumbs-up. Toya’s expression didn’t change much—but Yuu could tell from the way he stood that he was focused.

Yuu looked down at his hands. The faint reflection of the stage lights from the hallway glimmered on his fingers.

It’s strange, he thought. I was supposed to stay in the background… just another extra in someone else’s story. And yet here I am, walking onto a stage meant for those who chase the spotlight.<

He could already hear the crowd beyond the curtain—voices rising, the mix of anticipation and excitement swirling into something electric.

An glanced at everyone one last time. “Let’s go,” she said with a grin.

They walked out together.

The hallway opened into the stage’s side platform, where fog curled low around their feet.

The crowd came into view, blurry at first under the glare of the lights, then sharp and alive. Neon colors flashed from glowsticks and signs waved through the air.

The emcee’s voice echoed through the speakers:

“Next up—VIVID BAD SQUAD!”

A cheer erupted, rolling through the live house like a wave.

Yuu stepped up beside An as the first synth notes pulsed through the speakers. The beat crawled beneath his skin—familiar, alive.

He took a deep breath, heart syncing with the rhythm.

This feeling… It's real.

The stage lights flared—red, gold, violet—

And the music began.

The crowd erupted before the first beat even landed.

A thousand voices colliding, the air trembling with heat and color.

The opening synth crawled beneath the noise, low and steady, a heartbeat that didn't belong to one person but to the room itself.

Lights flickered in rhythm—red, gold, violet.

like sparks leaping across metal, burning in midair.

An took the front first, head tilted back, eyes glinting beneath the strobes.

A crimson flare caught her silhouette, and when she sang, her voice tore through the static—bright, fearless, alive.

She moved with the beat's fall and rise, every spin traced in light. Her jacket fanned out behind her as the strobes caught every motion.

one flash for each twist, one breath for each word.

Then Toya stepped in.

Cold blue light swept across him—an ocean under fire. His expression didn't waver; calm amid chaos.

The mic grazed his lips, and his verse slipped out low, measured, precise, a steady current cutting through An's blaze.

Akito followed.

He darted to the stage's edge, smoke curling around his shoes. His grin was sharp enough to catch light.

He snapped his fingers to the rhythm, shoulders rolling with swagger, his voice hitting each beat like a spark striking steel.

Confidence wasn't just in his tone—it was in the way the crowd answered him.

Then the fog shifted.

Kohane stepped forward.

Her presence was quieter, but the moment she did, the noise softened, the energy coiling into stillness.

The spotlight found her, faint and warm, like dawn before it breaks.

She drew in a breath.

a cue that wasn't sung, but felt.

And then.

Yuu's turn. (A/N: Bro at this point, I just don't know what to write as long as I just listen to their songs, I just write what's in my mind)

The fog thinned, and light crawled up his frame.

His shadow stretched behind him, long and wavering across the stage floor.

For a moment, the world shrank—the crowd's roar faded into pulse and breath. The weight of the light pressed against his shoulders, hot and heavy, demanding an answer.

He stepped forward.

And when he opened his mouth.

His voice rose.

Not trembling, not tentative, just real.

It carried over the beat like a spark carried by wind, blending into the soundscape An, Toya, Akito, and Kohane had built.

Their voices threaded together, colors weaving, red, blue, gold, violet—and his tone filled the empty space between them.

Their movements synchronized naturally.

An and Kohane circled each other midstage, the lights tracking every mirrored step.

Akito vaulted onto the riser, Toya crossing to the far side, the formation snapping tight—precision in motion, chaos made perfect.

And Yuu—

He didn't follow.

He made his own path, sliding between the shifting light beams, voice steady, body in sync with the rhythm's pulse.

The bass dropped.

Heavy, deliberate, a shockwave through the floor.

Fog rolled low, curling around their legs as the lights dimmed to a deep, molten red.

One by one, the others lowered—An, Akito, Toya, Kohane—crouching into the haze, their silhouettes melting into the pulse of the beat.

Yuu was left standing.

A single spotlight found him through the smoke.

Every eye, every camera, every heartbeat in the room followed that slice of light as it burned across his shoulders.

He didn't hesitate.

His heel struck the floor in rhythm, one-two, one-two-three, the beat crawling through his body like it had lived there all along.

He leaned back, twisted, dropped low, his arms slicing through the fog with clean precision.

An glanced up from the crouch, eyes wide, the corners of her mouth curving into a grin.

Akito's head tilted, that familiar smirk of pride flickering through.

Toya, calm even in the lightstorm, nodded once.

Kohane's gaze followed Yuu's every move, her hands curled close to her chest, breath caught somewhere between awe and excitement.

And then—

the rhythm slowed, spiraling down to its final loop.

The lights pulsed softer now, red bleeding into gold, gold into white, until the haze onstage shimmered like heat rising off concrete.

He took one step back.
Then another.

The fog curled around his ankles like smoke from dying embers.

He flipped.

A clean drop, knees bent, head bowed.

The crowd exploded.

A roar tore through the hall, voices overlapping, lightsticks flashing like wildfire across the sea of people. The others stepped forward again, silhouettes framed against the fog, each one raising a hand in unison.

The smoke thickened, swallowing their outlines as the final chord hit, soft, fading, almost like the echo of a dream.

When the lights dimmed, all that remained on stage were five faint shadows dissolving into the mist.

And as the music finally stilled, the audience screamed their names into the darkness.

Their echo carried long after Vivid BAD SQUAD vanished from sight.

And then—

“Haaahh… that was crazy.”

Yuu bent forward, hands on his knees, chest heaving. The air backstage was thick with heat and leftover smoke from the fog machines. His skin gleamed under the dim work lights, sweat tracing down his temple.

The muffled roar of the crowd still thundered through the walls, every chant of VBS! echoing like a heartbeat that refused to fade.

An burst out laughing first, throwing her towel over her shoulder. “Right?! You killed it out there, Yuu! That flip—seriously, the crowd went nuts!”

Akito grinned wide, smacking Yuu lightly on the back. “Didn’t think you had that in you! You almost outshone me for a second."

“Almost,” Toya said calmly.

Kohane clasped her hands together, eyes still shining from the adrenaline. “Yuu-kun… that was amazing! You didn’t even look nervous at all.”

Yuu straightened, still catching his breath. His heart felt like it was still on stage, beating in rhythm with the lights.

“I thought I’d mess up,” he admitted, voice half a laugh, half a sigh. “But when the beat hit—everything just… clicked.”

Yuu blinked, and for a brief moment, he saw it again, the blinding lights, the roar of the crowd, the heat of the air that felt like it could burn.

He couldn’t tell if it was the adrenaline or something deeper, but he knew one thing for sure.

He didn’t want that feeling to fade.

“Alright, guys! Let’s go change and go out together as units!” An said, still beaming, her voice bright with leftover adrenaline.

Akito groaned immediately. “Haah? I’m tired…” He slumped against the wall, towel hanging around his neck. “My legs are done, my voice is gone, and I think I inhaled half that fog machine.”

“Ehh?! Don’t be like that!” An whined, spinning toward him with exaggerated disbelief. Before he could reply, she wrapped her arms around Kohane from behind, resting her chin on her friend’s shoulder. “Right, Kohane? We should celebrate!”

Kohane let out a startled squeak, her face flushing as she fumbled to steady herself. “A-An! W-Wait—at least let me catch my breath first!”

An laughed, her energy infectious. “Nope! No rest for the victorious!”

Toya crossed his arms, watching the exchange with quiet amusement. “She’s not going to let anyone go home until she gets her after-party, is she?”

Yuu chuckled softly beside him, finally feeling his heartbeat start to calm. “Guess we don’t have much of a choice.”

Akito tilted his head, smirking. “You’re already getting dragged into her pace, huh?”

“...Maybe,” Yuu admitted with a grin. “But after that? I don’t really mind.”

An turned to him, eyes lighting up. “That’s the spirit! Come on, Yuu—you’re part of VBS now. We celebrate together.”

The others exchanged looks—Toya’s faint nod, Kohane’s shy smile, Akito’s reluctant sigh that didn’t quite hide his grin.

After the celebration—after the laughter, the clinking of glasses.

Yuu finally made it home.

The house was quiet, the kind of stillness that felt almost unreal after the noise of the live. He slid off his shoes at the genkan, the soft thud echoing faintly through the hallway. His body still hummed with exhaustion, the phantom throb of the bassline pulsing somewhere beneath his ribs.

He walked toward his room, each step heavier than the last. The door clicked softly shut behind him.

The faint city glow filtered through his window blinds—Shibuya’s neon bleeding into the dark like a memory that refused to fade. He let himself fall backward onto the bed, arms spread, staring up at the ceiling.

For a while, he just breathed.

The image of the stage replayed behind his eyes: the lights flaring gold and violet, the smoke curling around their legs, the roar of the crowd that felt like it could shake the world apart.

And he, standing in the middle of it all.

He turned his head slightly, “…That really happened, huh.” His voice was barely a whisper.

He closed his eyes.

The world was quiet again, but somewhere in that silence, the rhythm still played, a heartbeat he couldn’t quite turn off.

Maybe that was okay.

Because for the first time in this fabricated, fragile world.

He felt real.

…

(Forced Update… Maintenance… Please do not close the game. We appreciate your patience while the world undergoes necessary maintenance.)

…

(Update Complete.)

The words echoed faintly in Yuu's head, though he couldn't remember if he'd dreamt them or heard them aloud.

Morning light filtered through his curtains, faint and pale. His eyes cracked open to find himself still in his unit attire outfit.

"Ah… I fell asleep, didn't I?" he muttered, rubbing his eyes. His voice came out rough, the kind that hadn't quite returned from the night's cheering.

He shuffled into the bathroom, splashed cold water on his face, and stared into the mirror. His reflection stared back—eyes tired, hair sticking up like static had declared war on gravity.

"Still alive… good enough," he mumbled.

When he returned to his room, he swiped a hand through the air—shhhk—and the familiar blue glow of the Project SEKAI hologram bloomed before him. Icons drifted like soft motes of light, spinning lazily in the air.

Then he noticed it.

"…Huh?"

The mail icon blinked. Unread.

He tapped it.

[Update Complete]

Yuu blinked once. "It… updated? While I was asleep?"

He frowned, leaning in as if squinting would somehow make the answer appear. "Better ask Miku about this… only she knows what's going on."

He reached toward the floating SEKAI icon—
and froze.

"Huh? Where… where's the SEKAI?"

He swiped again. Nothing. The hologram flickered, searching for something that wasn't there.

Is it just me… or did it disappear?<

A prickle of unease crawled up his spine.

"I should ask the others," he said finally, trying to sound more confident than he felt.

He starts preparing himself for school, grabs his bag, throws on his shoes, and practically stumbles out the door.

The morning air was brisk, carrying the faint hum of traffic and the echo of school chatter. As he neared Kamiyama High, he spotted two familiar figures by the gate—Toya and Akito, deep in conversation.

“There they are!” he breathed, relief washing through him. He broke into a jog, waving. “Guys! Wait!”

Both turned at the sound of his voice.

Toya’s expression was blank.

Akito’s eyebrows furrowed in mild confusion.

“…Huh?” Toya asked slowly. "Who are you...?"

Yuu froze mid-step. “Huh? What do you… mean, Aoyagi-san?”

Akito tilted his head. “Do you know him, Toya?”

“I don’t think so,” Toya replied evenly.

Yuu laughed weakly, waving a hand. “Hey, stop joking around—Akito-san, Aoyagi-kun, it’s not funny—”

But they weren’t joking. Their eyes—confused, distant—met his with the kind of detached politeness you offer a stranger.

The sound of the crowd faded. The air grew still.

Yuu’s smile faltered, his breath caught in his throat.

Huh…?<

The world suddenly felt one update too far from what he knew.

Chapter End Notes

Updating Beyond The Stage...

Added:
- Major Character Death
- Depression
- Suicidal Thoughts
- Guilt and Regret
- Broken Friendships
- Repetition as Punishment
- Despair and Determination
- Time Loop

LETS ALL HAVE A GOOD READ :D - ExitCue

Chapter 51: Project Sekai? (Leo/Need)

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

Yuu's smile faltered, his breath catching in his throat.

Huh…?

The world suddenly felt one update too far from what he knew.

"…Sorry," he muttered, stepping back as Toya and Akito exchanged uncertain glances before walking off. Their conversation faded into the morning noise—normal, steady, indifferent.

"Wait," Yuu called out again before he could stop himself.

They paused. Akito turned, brows furrowing. "What do you want?"

"...Vivid BAD SQUAD."

The words felt heavy leaving his mouth.

Both boys stared at him, confusion flickering in their eyes.

"A… squad?" Toya echoed, tilting his head slightly.

Yuu blinked, a cold realization crawling up his spine. "Ah… nothing. Sorry. Thank you for your time."

He bowed quickly, forcing a small laugh, and turned on his heel. His footsteps echoed down the pavement, uneven, too fast.

They don't know Vivid BAD SQUAD… meaning… the SEKAI didn't exist yet.<

The thought struck him harder than it should have.

That means this is where everything started…<

He stopped at the edge of the school gate, sunlight spilling across the courtyard — warm, bright, and painfully empty. The laughter of students carried on the wind, but not a single face turned his way.

"Haa… what am I doing…" Yuu exhaled, the words barely escaping his lips.
He pressed a hand against the cold iron gate, feeling the rough paint beneath his fingertips.

"What should I do now…?"

His voice was small—swallowed by the wind that carried laughter, footsteps, life.

Students passed by without a glance. Their conversations bled together into a dull, distant hum, like static between radio channels.

Yuu lowered his gaze. The sunlight was too bright; it made the world look sharper than it should, every color too clean, too untouched.

Everything's normal… except me.<

He rubbed the back of his neck, trying to ground himself, but even his own skin felt unfamiliar. No notifications, no pings, no SEKAI icons glowing faintly in the air.

Just silence.

The kind of silence that made him wonder if he'd already disappeared and hadn't noticed yet.

With that, he started walking—no direction, no purpose.

The morning bell rang behind him, distant and hollow, but he didn't turn back.

His steps carried him through the quiet streets of Kamiyama, past vending machines humming in the sun, past students rushing to class, past everything that was supposed to be familiar.

He didn't know where he was going.

Only that anywhere was better than standing still.

He let out a breath, slow and heavy.

"Guess I'm skipping school today…" he muttered to no one, hands in his pockets.

Somehow, his feet led him to the arcade.

Inside, the air buzzed with overlapping sounds—buttons clacking, coins dropping, synthetic jingles looping endlessly. The world here was loud enough to drown out thought.

He played rhythm games without focus, hands moving out of habit more than intention.

Taiko no Tatsujin.

Maimai.

His fingers struck to the beat, but his heart lagged behind.

When he was tired of the games, he drifted to the crane machines.

Lost a few coins.

Won nothing.

Then headed to a fast-food counter, eating a burger that tasted like cardboard and silence.

He went back to the arcade after lunch.

"What am I doing…?"<

He muttered, his reflection flashing against the Maimai screen, colors warping around his face.

“What’s my purpose again…?”<

He didn’t remember anymore.

He didn’t know.

His body moved mechanically, tapping, sliding, spinning—just chasing lights that no longer meant anything.

“I didn’t want to be a part of this,” he whispered. “I didn’t ask to be pulled in… but now…”

His words trailed off—until a voice brushed across his thoughts, soft, familiar.

“Then what’s wrong?” she asked. “Hazuki-kun, what’s really bothering you?”<

He froze.

That voice—clear as day, echoed somewhere between memory and illusion.

“Is it really okay for me to be here?” he muttered under his breath. “I’m not part of this story. I’m not a main character. I’m just an outsider… a variable.”

His eyes dimmed, his movements slowing. “I’m not a protagonist.”

“You’re wrong, Yuu,” she said gently. “You are a protagonist.”<

His hands faltered.

The beat collapsed.

MISS. MISS. MISS.

The screen flashed red.
He blinked, looking around—only to find the same scattered crowd: a few kids watching him play, an arcade attendant sweeping near the back.
No one who could’ve spoken.

Then—softly, almost like a whisper carried by static—

“You are the protagonist beyond the stage.”<

And he remembered.

“…Ah.”

Yuu stepped back, heart hammering. He slung his bag over his shoulder and bolted out of the arcade, weaving past the startled onlookers, the sunlight blinding as he burst into the street.

That’s right… I’m the protagonist.<

Even if they forget me… even if their SEKAI is gone… I’ll make them remember who they are!<

Wait for me... EVERYONE!

....

Changing perspective...

The pedestrian light turned green, and the wave of people surged forward across Shibuya Crossing.

Among them, Ichika Hoshino walked with her hands tucked into her pockets, her gaze half-lost in the blur of screens and motion.

Then—

<♪ — ♪>

A melody drifted through the air, faint beneath the city noise.

She looked up, blinking against the glare of a giant monitor.

Miku's holographic image filled the screen — her voice bright and effortless, dancing through a kaleidoscope of light.

"Miku's amazing…" Ichika murmured, eyes tracing the perfect synch of sound and motion.
"She's always so free and versatile. She can do anything."

Her words hung in the air for a moment, swallowed by the hum of the city.

"Unlike me…" she whispered.

And just like that—

The melody carried her somewhere else.

Flashback.

"Phew! I've never done band stuff before, but playing together like that was really fun!" Saki's voice rang bright with laughter, the kind that echoed through the summer air.

"Yeah," Shiho replied, a small, rare smile breaking through. "I guess it was quite rewarding."

"I agree, it was exhausting, but also a lot of fun, wasn't it?" Honami said wiping sweat from her brow.

Ichika looked at them all.

"Hey… everyone… I just wanted to say thank you," she said softly. "Thanks for going along with my sudden suggestion to form a band and play Miku's songs… Also… if you don't mind—can we do this again?"

"Of course, we should do this again!" Saki grinned.
"We'll practice again tomorrow, the day after tomorrow, and beyond!"

They all laughed together.

Then Saki looked up suddenly. "Oh… was that a shooting star just now?"

“What? Where?” Honami spun toward the sky.

"Hey! Let's go to the jungle gym! Maybe we can see more!" Saki suggested.

And they did.

Sparks crossed the night above them — one after another.
“The stars… they’re so pretty,” Honami said. “I saw something on TV this morning about a meteor shower.”

“A meteor shower…” Ichika repeated, her voice soft. “That must look amazing.”

Saki sighed.

“What’s wrong?” Ichika asked.

Saki smiled, faint but sincere. “Hehehe… Just making a wish that we could stay like this forever. Playing together, talking about stuff, watching shooting stars on our way home… I wish we could keep doing all that forever.”

Ichika nodded. “I wish we could, too.”

“Me three!” Honami chimed in.

“Same,” Shiho added quietly.

Honami brightened. “You know what? I’ve got binoculars and a star chart at home! I’ll grab them so we can stargaze together!”

“That’s a thing?” Shiho blinked. “Interesting.”

“Okay, so let’s all go and drop off our instruments, then meet back here,” Saki said.

“Yeah!” Ichika replied, laughing.

The memory dissolved.

When Ichika blinked again, the sky above her was gray.

The laughter was gone.

She stood at the top of a jungle gym — hands cold against the metal bar, the faint plastic rust smell mixing with autumn air.
A bag hung at her side, and when she looked down, she realized she was holding a CD.

“Miku’s… album?”

She didn’t remember buying it.

“Huh… since when did I…?”

“Uhm… may I ask something?”

A voice came from behind her.

Ichika turned, startled.

A boy stood a few steps away — his hair a tousled mess of black, his Kamiyama High uniform slightly wrinkled.

“Huh? Oh… umm… what is it?” she asked, clutching the CD a little tighter.

His eyes lit up. “That’s… Hatsune Miku’s CD in your hands, right?!”

“Y-Yeah…” she replied, taken aback by his sudden enthusiasm.

“Ohhh, that’s cool! I’m actually a big fan of Miku too!”

“Really…?”

“Yeah, yeah!” He nodded quickly, smiling like he’d just found a piece of home in a foreign world.

Ichika blinked, uncertain.

Still, there was something about him — a strange warmth behind his nervous grin.

“Then…” he asked, tilting his head, “what do you like about Miku’s songs?”

The question hung in the air — simple, sincere, and oddly grounding.
It wasn’t something people usually asked, not like that.

Ichika looked down at the CD again, fingers tracing the edge of its case.

“I guess…” she began quietly, “they always sound like they’re trying to reach someone. Even if the words are sad, they still… move forward.”

When she looked up, the boy was smiling. Not the casual kind — but the kind that carried a quiet understanding.

Like he’d been waiting to hear that answer.

“What about you?” Ichika asked, tilting her head slightly. “What do you like about Hatsune Miku?”

He blinked — the question caught him off guard.

Hmm…” He scratched the back of his neck, gaze lifting toward the gray sky. “I have a lot to say, honestly…”

He paused, then smiled faintly. “Ah—let’s say… she’s free. She can sing whatever she wants, and she’s never afraid to express herself.”

Ichika’s eyes widened. The wind brushed past, carrying the faint sound of traffic and the city’s pulse.

“That’s what I’m thinking too,” she said softly.

Their smiles met — brief, quiet, genuine.

Without hesitation, the two began talking — about songs, about voices, about Hatsune Miku.

At first, it was small things: favorite tracks, concerts they'd seen online, the way Miku's tone shifted from melancholy to radiant hope.

Ichika didn't even notice how easily the words came out of her.

She didn't know who he was — just that his presence felt warm, easy to be around.

Time slipped quietly between their laughter.

The sky dimmed from pale gold to indigo before she realized how long they'd been there.

"Ah… I gotta go home now," Ichika said, glancing at the orange glow of a streetlight flickering on nearby.

He blinked, checking his phone. "Ah! I also need to go home!"

Ichika laughed softly. "It seems our passions really align, huh?"

"You could say that," he replied with a faint grin.

"By the way," she added, tilting her head, "what are you doing here? Are you also from around here?"

He froze for a heartbeat, eyes darting away. "Ah—yeah. Yeah, I live here too."

"I see…" she said gently. "Then maybe we'll see each other again, huh?"

"You could say that," he repeated, the same easy tone, though his gaze drifted somewhere distant.

"Then… I'm going now."

Ichika climbed down from the jungle gym, brushing the dust from her skirt. She took a few steps before—

"Uhm! Wait!"

She turned around.

He was standing awkwardly, rubbing the back of his neck, but his voice came out steady.

"If it's… alright with you… I'd like to talk more. And more with you."

Ichika blinked, surprised — then laughed softly. "Sure. I'd love to talk to you as well."

His eyes brightened. "Then… can we, uh, add each other?"

He lifted his phone, the faint glow of a QR code lighting his face.

"Mm… sure."

"Great!"

She stepped closer, her phone's screen reflecting in his eyes as she scanned the code.

Beep.

The app confirmed the connection.

Ichika glanced at his name.

Hazuki Yuu.

she wondered, the thought lingering like an echo she couldn't quite place.

"Well then—see ya!" he said, waving lightly.

"Yeah… see you," She replied, smiling faintly.

They parted at the crossroads, the night air quiet except for the hum of traffic and the fading rhythm of their conversation.

[Ichika's Room.]

The room was dim except for the soft glow of her phone screen.

Ichika sat on the edge of her bed, fingers resting on her knees, her thoughts looping back to the boy she'd met just hours ago.

Her eyes drifted to the corner of the room — to the old guitar case gathering dust.

"My guitar case is so dusty…" she murmured, running a hand across it. The faint smell of varnish still clung to it, faint but familiar.

But I guess I won't ever be playing it again…
We promised each other we'd form a band and be together forever, but now…

She sighed, leaning back. The silence stretched until a sudden flash lit up the room.

"Huh? What was that light just now…?"

She looked at her phone.

"Oh… it was just him."

A message. Just a simple "Thanks for today."

Ichika smiled faintly — and in that moment, something stirred at the edge of her memory.

[Flashback.]

The playground, bathed in sunset orange.

"Say," he had asked suddenly, eyes glimmering with curiosity, "have you ever thought of forming a band?"

Ichika blinked at him, caught off guard. “No… I…” Her voice faltered. “I have, but… it seems it won’t be happening.”

He tilted his head. “Is that… your true feeling?”

"I don’t know..."

"Hmm... Then I’ll help you."

"Huh? Help me?"

"That’s right! I’ll help you find your true feelings. And once you do, those feelings will give birth to songs."

"I see..."

[End of flashback]

“He’ll help me, huh...” Ichika murmured, eyes softening.

Her phone buzzed with a new message.

Yuu: Hey, can you check out this song?

“Untitled...?"

She whispered, tilting her head with a small smile. He sure moves fast.

She quickly typed back:

Ichika: Sure, hold on—let me get my earphones.

Reaching for them on her desk, she plugged the jack in and pressed play.

The moment she did, her screen flashed white.

“Wh—what?! I can’t see!” Ichika gasped, clutching the phone as light enveloped her room.

[Back to Yuu’s perspective]

“That should do the work... right?” Yuu asked, adjusting his smartwatch.

A faint shimmer of blue light flickered above it—the hologram of Miku, glitching slightly, her voice layered with digital distortion. [A/N: Yuu Hazuki's Glitching Miku from his Sekai]

“Yeah,” she replied, her tone faint but warm. “With this... the School SEKAI will be born. Ichika’s feelings will shape its walls... and its sky.”

Yuu exhaled in relief, then smiled tiredly.

“It was exhausting... acting like a stranger to her.”

“Hehe... you did well.” Miku’s image glitched again, briefly showing her with a sad smile. “You always do.”

Yuu looked down at the watch, eyes shadowed. “Still... I didn’t expect you to suddenly appear like that.”

[Flashback]

When he was running through the empty streets earlier, his smartwatch had suddenly flickered to life.

Static—then her voice.

“Yuu,” the distorted Miku had whispered,

“The time has come. Find them... and awaken their worlds.”

“You don’t have to tell me that!” Yuu shouted, breath ragged as he dashed forward—
his shoulder brushing against strangers, footsteps echoing against the concrete.

People turned as he rushed past, their voices melting into a distant hum,
the world around him dimming—like a stage where the spotlight had gone dark.

“Haa… haa…” Yuu gasped, clutching his side as he slowed, heart pounding.

[Flashback end]

“With this... Ichika Hoshino should be able to do it without me,” he murmured, staring at his smartwatch as the faint holographic glow pulsed once before dimming.

“After all... I’m not needed here.”

“You’re being mean to yourself again,” came a soft, glitching voice.

Miku’s flickering hologram appeared—eyes faintly luminescent, her outline unstable like ripples in glass.

Yuu looked at her quietly. “I’m just being honest. The story doesn’t need someone like me.”

“That’s not true,” she replied, distortion crackling through her words. “Every story needs someone who remembers how it began.”

Yuu’s gaze lingered on the flickering hologram.

His reflection shimmered faintly across Miku’s light — half there, half gone.

“That’s my purpose,” he said softly. “Once I do that… I’ll return to my own goal.”

He paused, voice growing faint.

“And that is… going back home.”

The hologram wavered, as if reacting to his words.

“Home…” Miku repeated, her voice distorting into static. “Do you even remember what it looks like?”

Yuu’s fingers tightened around his smartwatch.

“…I will. Once this is all over.”

Miku’s expression dimmed, her outline fragmenting.

“Then… I hope you make it back there, Yuu.”

Chapter End Notes

I have updated this chapter many times now...

Chapter 52: Project Sekai? #2 (Leo/need)

[The Next Day – Ichika's Perspective]

Scramble Crossing, Morning

The crosswalk was awash in color — people moving like tides beneath a hundred neon screens. Ichika adjusted the strap of her bag and let her gaze drift upward to the largest one, where Miku's music video played beneath the sky.

This is a good album, she thought, the faint smile tugging at her lips. All the songs on it are great. I'll add them to my favorites playlist.
She tapped her screen, only for a quiet notification to pop up.
Oh, I can't add any more songs? Looks like I filled it up with nothing but Miku songs...

Her reflection shimmered faintly on the glass of her phone.
Miku's amazing. She can sing any song, in any style. She can do anything... unlike me.

And then —
a voice brushed through her thoughts.

"That's right! I'll help you find your true feelings. And once you do, those feelings will give birth to songs."

Ichika blinked. The voice felt almost real — vivid enough to make her pause mid-step.
A small chuckle escaped her lips.
"That guy…"

Miyamasuzaka Girls Academy

The morning light slanted through the classroom windows. Students filled the halls with chatter and the faint clatter of desks shifting.

"Ah… Honami."

Honami froze mid-step, eyes widening slightly. "Ichika? Um… hi."

"Hi."

Silence pressed between them — the kind that made every second feel longer than it should.

Ichika took a hesitant breath. "How have you bee—"

"Morning, Honami!" another voice cut through. "Did you do all of the problems for today's math class?"

"S-sorry," Honami stammered, "A friend's calling me. I've got to go."

"Oh… yeah."

Ichika's voice faded as Honami hurried past, leaving only the echo of footsteps and the hollow beat of her heart.

"Hi, Ichika!" another classmate called, waving as she approached.

"Hi."

The girl tilted her head. "Huh? You're looking down today. Something happen?"

"No, not really."

"Well, you kinda look like that most days. You have that… somber air about you."

Ichika forced a small laugh. "Haha… what are you talking about? Anyway, do you mind showing me your math homework… uhm—"

She stopped as someone passed by, the air shifting colder.

Shiho.

"...Hi," Ichika managed, her voice smaller than she wanted it to be.

Shiho only gave a brief glance. "…Hi." Then kept walking.

The murmurs behind her resumed.

"That Hinomori's got attitude," one girl whispered. "She's cool, but also kinda scary, don't you think?"

"She's not really like that…" Ichika muttered under her breath.

"Sorry, did you say something, Ichika?"

"Oh, it's nothing."

The bell rang — shrill and sharp.

"Oh shoot, class is about to start! Come on, or we'll be late!"

"Okay…"

Ichika followed them in, her thoughts still trailing behind.

Class 1-C

The chatter of morning classes hummed faintly under the fluorescent lights.

Chalk scratched against the board, and sunlight fell in thin slices across the desks.

Ichika sat near the window, chin resting on her palm.

"…Sigh."

Her pencil rolled across the desk and stopped by her hand — as if echoing her stillness.

“Alright, everyone,” the teacher said from the front. “We have two new students joining us from today. Come in.”

A cheerful voice answered, bright and unhesitating. “Yes, ma’am!”

The girl in the doorway beamed like sunlight itself.

“Hi! It’s nice to meet you all! My name’s Saki Tenma!” Her voice was lively, filled with warmth that immediately cut through the classroom’s dull air. “I’ve actually been a student here since junior high, but I ended up in the hospital for a while. Now I’m back to perfect health and ready to have a great time! My plan is to enjoy high school life to the fullest ♪ Let’s all be friends!”

The room rippled with quiet murmurs — some surprised, others curious.

The teacher smiled. “I’m counting on everyone to help Ms. Tenma settle in. Ms. Tenma, your seat is over there.”

“Thank you!”

Saki walked down the aisle, the faint scent of spring shampoo trailing behind her. As she passed Ichika’s desk, the two locked eyes — a flash of recognition.

"Nice to meet you, Hoshino! Let's be friends ♪
"

"Saki, you joker... Why didn't you tell me you were coming back to school?"

"Teehee! Sorry, but I wanted it to be a surprise!"

And just like that, Saki smiled, that same gentle smile Ichika hadn’t seen in years, before continuing toward her seat.

The shrill ding-dong of the school bell echoed through the sunlit classroom.

Desks scraped against the floor, conversations flaring to life as students stretched and gathered their lunches.

“Come on, Ichi! Let’s go find Hona and Shiho!” Saki beamed, her energy spilling over like sunlight after a storm.

Ichika hesitated, fingers curling around her lunchbox. “Saki… actually…”

Saki tilted her head, golden hair brushing her cheek. “Hmm? What is it?”

“I-It’s just that… lunch break is too short to go over for a chat. We wouldn’t even have time to eat.”

Saki laughed, unbothered. “We can talk while eating! Come on, let’s go!”

“Uhm… o-okay, sure…” Ichika gave a small, helpless smile.

But as they stepped into the corridor, Ichika couldn’t shake the faint prickling beneath her skin. Something about that smile… felt familiar.

The hallways of Miyamasuzaka bustled with life, laughter spilling from open doors, the clatter of shoes against polished tile.

“Look, she’s over there! Shiho!” Saki pointed ahead, voice laced with excitement.

Shiho turned, Her cool expression softened slightly. “Saki? What are you doing here?”

“Teehee! Surprised to see me?” Saki said, puffing her chest proudly. “I’ve been discharged from the hospital! Starting today, I’m back at school!”

Shiho blinked, a hint of relief flashing in her eyes before she looked away. “Oh… really? That’s good.”

“Huh? Shiho, is something wrong?”

Before Shiho could answer, another voice joined in — hesitant, trembling at the edges.

“No way… Saki?”

Ichika turned. Honami stood a few steps away, eyes wide, lunchbox clutched tightly in both hands.

“Hona!” Saki brightened instantly. “It’s been ages! I just came back to school today!”

Honami’s smile wavered. “I didn’t know you were coming back… That’s really great news.” She paused, eyes darting to the side. “I, um… I have to go now. Sorry.”

“Oh, you do?” Saki’s shoulders drooped a little.

Shiho adjusted her bag strap. “My next lesson’s in a different classroom, so I’ve got to go too.”

“What’s the hurry? I thought we could have lunch together!” Saki said, her tone light but edged with hurt.

“I… I already promised a friend I’d meet her for lunch. You take care, Saki,” Honami replied softly, already turning away.

“...Hona, but…” Saki’s voice trailed off as both girls disappeared down opposite corridors. She exhaled a weak laugh. “Gosh, she seemed in a real rush.”

Ichika stood beside her, quiet, watching the empty hallway where their friends had been.

“They’re probably just really busy,” she said finally. “It gets like this in high school. A lot of things are… different now.”

Saki sighed, hugging her lunch to her chest. “But they should at least have lunch with us, right?”

Ichika nodded faintly, her heart tightening with unspoken feelings — of distance, of time, and the invisible walls that now stood between them.

...

...

The school bell rang, its echo fading into the chatter of students and the clatter of lockers.

[Miyamasuzaka Girls Academy — Locker Area.]

[Honami's perspective]

Honami tucked a stray strand of hair behind her ear as her classmates crowded around the narrow hallway.

“Let’s walk home together, Honami!” one of them chirped, slinging her bag over her shoulder.

“Okay,” Honami said softly, smiling just enough to hide the tension in her voice.

“Hey, did you hear?” another classmate leaned in, lowering her voice with mock secrecy. “The class next door got a new student today.”

“Ah, yeah,” the first girl replied. “That one with the dyed hair. Didn’t you talk to her at lunch break, Honami?”

“Y-Yes,” Honami stammered. “We used to go to the same school.”

“So you already knew her, huh?”
“I heard she was sick and just recovered enough to come back to school?”

“That’s right.” Honami’s gaze dropped to her shoes. “I didn’t know she was coming back today. It was… kind of a shock to see her.”

“It was nice of her to remember you and come say hi,” one of them said, smiling.

“Yes… she’s very kind,” Honami murmured, a small warmth flickering in her tone. “And always cheerful.”

A soft sound of footsteps broke through the chatter.

Shiho Hinomori was passing by, bass case slung over her shoulder, eyes forward — calm, cool, unreadable.

“Oh, are you heading home, Hinomori?” a classmate called.

Shiho’s reply came quietly and flat. “Why, do you need something?”

“Uh—no, I was just asking.”

“I see. Well then… bye.”

Her voice carried no malice, but the wall between them was unmistakable.

Shiho turned and walked off, her steps steady, fading down the hall.

“…She’s kind of cold,” one whispered once she was gone. “Unapproachable.”

“Yeah,” the other agreed. “She’s cool, but kind of scary too. I heard she’s in a band — that thing she was carrying must be a guitar?”

Honami’s voice broke through, barely above a whisper. “It’s a bass guitar.”

“You can tell?”

“I, um… heard someone mention it.”

The conversation drifted on, rumors and secondhand truths weaving through the air.

“Apparently, she’s always been like that,” one said.

“She gets hostile when people try to befriend her.”

“Maybe she just prefers being alone.”

Honami’s hands tightened around her bag strap. “Hey, um…” she began, forcing her voice steady. “Want to stop by the bookstore on the way home?”

Her friends exchanged glances, then smiled. “Sure, sounds good!”

“Great,” Honami said, her relief hidden behind a quiet breath.

The group exited through the sliding doors, sunlight spilling over the polished floors.

The breeze outside carried the faint hum of traffic and laughter from nearby students.

And there, standing just beyond the gates, was a boy.

His Kamiyama High uniform caught the light, hair tousled by the wind, a phone held loosely in one hand as the screen glowed faintly blue.

His Kamiyama High uniform caught the fading light, tie slightly loose, hair tousled like he’d just run a hand through it.

A phone glowed faintly blue in his grasp, reflecting across his eyes.

The group of Miyamasuzaka girls immediately noticed.

A wave of murmurs rippled through them, followed by quiet giggles.

“Who’s that?” one whispered, smiling behind her hand.

“He looks kind of cool…” another said, eyes bright. Then she turned to Honami. “Right, Honami?”

“Eh? I—uh…” Honami blinked, caught off guard. Her voice faltered as she turned toward him.

And at that moment, the boy looked up.

Their eyes met, just briefly, before he smiled, a small, polite curve of his lips, and raised his hand in a quiet wave.

Honami froze. The sunlight glinted off the boy’s wristwatch, where a faint holographic shimmer pulsed once, then disappeared.

“Kyaa~ Honami!” her friend squealed, leaning closer. “Do you know him?”

“Huh? N-no!” Honami stammered, waving her hands defensively. “I don’t—!”

The faint glow of sunset washed the courtyard in gold, streaking long shadows across the pavement as students drifted toward the gates in small groups. The soft chatter of after-school life filled the air—until a familiar voice cut through it.

“Huh? What are you doing here?”

Ichika stopped in her tracks, blinking in surprise at the figure waiting by the railing.

Yuu Hazuki stood there, the faint breeze tugging at his hair, his Kamiyama High uniform slightly wrinkled as though he’d been standing for a while. His phone was still in hand, the light on the screen dimming as he looked up at her.

“Hoshino-san,” he said, tone light but edged with mild reproach. “I’ve been waiting. It seems you didn’t check my messages?”

“Message?” Ichika tilted her head, pulling out her phone—and froze. “Ah!”

On the screen was Yuu’s text from earlier that afternoon:
‘Hey, want to meet after school? I’ve got something cool to show you—about Miku.’

“Ah, sorry! I didn’t check!” she said quickly, bowing her head a little.

“That’s fine…” Yuu waved a hand dismissively, though his gaze shifted past her—and stilled. His eyes widened slightly at the sight of the girl standing beside Ichika.

She had soft, honey-blonde hair and a smile that seemed to carry the warmth of spring itself.

“Ah! I forgot to introduce you to her!” Ichika said, flustered. “Hazuki-kun, this is Saki Tenma. And Saki, this is Hazuki Yuu.”

Yuu offered a polite smile, bowing slightly. “Nice to meet you. I’m Hazuki Yuu—and, uh, I’m a hardcore Miku fan.”

For a moment, Saki simply blinked at him, studying his face with quiet curiosity.

Then her lips curved upward into a mischievous grin.

“Ichi… you didn’t tell me you had a boyfriend.”

The words hit like a thunderclap.

“EH?!”

Both Ichika and Yuu yelped in perfect unison, their voices overlapping.

Ichika’s face turned crimson in an instant. “W-Wait, no! It’s not like that!” she waved her hands frantically, nearly knocking her bag off her shoulder. “Yuu-kun’s just—just a friend! We just talk about Miku, that’s all!”

Saki blinked, pretending to think as she tapped her chin, then smiled teasingly. “Miku, huh? That’s a new one. So you two bond over music?”

Yuu laughed nervously, rubbing the back of his neck. “You could say that. We both really like her songs, so… I guess we just click.”

Ichika puffed her cheeks, still red. “Don’t make it sound weird, Saki…”

Saki giggled, her eyes twinkling with amusement. “Alright, alright, I’m just teasing. You two are kinda cute together though—oh, I mean as friends!”

Yuu sighed softly, though the corners of his mouth tugged upward despite himself.

The late afternoon light painted the street in warm amber tones as the three walked side by side, the soft murmur of traffic blending with laughter spilling from nearby cafés.

“By the way,” Yuu began, slipping his phone into his pocket, “are you two going to hang out together? I feel like I’m intruding since it kinda looks like you’re having a reunion.”

Saki blinked, eyes wide. “We did! How did you know?! Are you a psychic or something?!”

“Haha… I was just looking at you two,” Yuu said with a light laugh, the corners of his mouth curving up.

“It’s fine, you’re not intruding, right Saki?” Ichika said.

“Yeah, yeah!” Saki waved her hand cheerfully. “Besides, we’re going to celebrate my joining the soft tennis club! The more the merrier!”

“Congrats, Tenma-san,” Yuu said with a small nod.

“Thank you!” Saki beamed, her grin brighter than the streetlights flickering on around them. Then she tilted her head, squinting slightly as her gaze lingered on him. “Say… have we met before? I know this sounds weird, but I feel like we’ve met somewhere.”

Yuu paused for a brief moment before smiling faintly. “Hmmm… have we?”

Saki’s brow furrowed, then she shrugged it off. “Well, whatever! I want bubble tea!”

“Alright, we’re going,” Ichika sighed, unable to hide the ghost of a smile tugging at her lips.

Main Street

The bubble tea shop was alive with chatter — the hum of blenders, the clink of ice against glass, and the laughter of students crowded around pastel-colored tables.

Saki raised her cup high, her eyes sparkling. “Let’s celebrate my joining the soft tennis club with bubble tea! Cheers!”

Ichika laughed softly, bumping her straw against Saki’s. “Cheers. It’s good you found a club you like.”

“Cheers,” Yuu added, smiling over the rim of his drink.

“Thanks for tagging along and checking them out with me!” Saki said, swirling her drink happily.

“You should take it easy at first,” Ichika reminded her. “The club captain said it’s relaxed, but you haven’t done sports in a while.”

Saki nodded, still smiling. “True! But the captain and advisor were really nice, weren’t they? I was worried they wouldn’t want me to join, since I’m still recovering.”

Yuu blinked. “Tenma-san has been hospitalized?”

“Yeah,” Ichika answered softly, glancing at Saki. “But then she suddenly said she wanted to join the club.”

“But I want to!” Saki said with her usual enthusiasm.

Ichika sighed. “Saki, you shouldn’t push yourself too—”

“Anyway!” Saki interrupted, dramatically lifting her cup again. “Becoming a member of a club is the first step in my wonderful school life! And the next step is… this!”

Ichika looked up at the neon sign above them. “A bubble tea café, huh… No wonder you were craving it.”

“Yup!” Saki said, grinning. “I’ve been wanting to go for bubble tea with friends for so long! I missed the entire bubble tea craze, but who cares! Back when everyone was talking about how awesome it was, I was stuck with hospital food.”

“Must’ve been harsh,” Yuu murmured, his tone gentle.

“Saki… poor you…” Ichika added softly.

Saki laughed, brushing it off with her usual brightness. “Well, I’m fine now! So I’m going to gorge myself on all the delicious things! Like that apple pie we shared once, remember?"

Ichika blinked. “I don’t think so?”

“You know, back in elementary school!” Saki said eagerly. “You were obsessed with Miku songs and had us try playing together. Does that jog your memory?”

“R-Really?!” Yuu said, his eyes lighting up.

“S-Saki!” Ichika flushed, clearing her throat. “Ah, I remember now… Honami learned drums in the brass band, so we brought instruments and met up at your house.”

“Exactly!” Saki said, delighted. “We got so excited about starting a band! But, well, you know how that went.”

Ichika chuckled quietly. “It was all over the place.”

“But Shiho got so into it!” Saki said. “She said we had to practice until we could play perfectly — nothing could stop her. We kept going until everyone was wiped out, and then Honami brought apple pie for us. It tasted divine…”

Laughter drifted between them, then fell into a soft, thoughtful quiet.

“It feels a bit lonely, just the two of us,” Saki murmured — and then realized Yuu was right there. “Ah! Sorry, Hazuki-kun!”

Yuu shook his head with a polite smile. “No worries. Watching you two talk about your childhood is… kinda nice, actually.”

Ichika gave him a sideways look. “You’re interested in someone else’s youth?”

“Then share your childhood memories!” Saki chimed in, leaning forward with a grin.

Caught between their playful gazes, Yuu exhaled a quiet laugh, his fingers brushing the condensation on his cup. “My childhood, huh? I guess it’s not that interesting… but if you insist.”

Kamiyama Street — Late Afternoon

The sun was dipping low, painting the city gold as students scattered along the sidewalks.

“Bye, Ichi! See you tomorrow!” Saki waved, her smile bright against the fading light.

“Take care, Saki!” Ichika called back, waving with both hands.

“Take care,” Yuu added, a gentle smile on his face.

Saki turned halfway down the road, her twin tails bouncing. “Hazu—no… Yuu-kun! You better take care of Ichi!”

Yuu rubbed the back of his neck awkwardly. “Y-Yeah…”

Her laughter echoed before fading into the crowd.

The street quieted, leaving only the rhythm of footsteps. Ichika and Yuu walked side by side, their shadows stretching across the pavement.

Ichika thought, eyes tracing the sky.

If only I could make that happen… but it doesn’t seem doable at this point…

Then—

A faint light flickered against her palm.

“Huh? Did my phone just flash?”

A soft tone chimed, and a familiar holographic shimmer burst from her screen.

“Oh? It’s Miku.”

“Huh?!”

“Hello!” Miku’s voice rang gently, her expression bright and warm. “You look sad. Is something wrong?”

Before Ichika could answer, the virtual idol blinked, noticing the boy beside her. “Oh! It’s you!”

Yuu raised an eyebrow, calm despite the surreal sight. “Hello, Hatsune Miku from the School SEKAI.”

Miku tilted her head, scanning him carefully. “You look familiar… but it seems you already know about us?”

“Yeah,” Yuu said softly, glancing at her reflection in the phone’s glow. “After all…”

A faint bzzt interrupted him.

His smartwatch pulsed with light—then projected another hologram.
A second Miku appeared, her body flickering with digital static.

“Hello, me,” the glitching one said, her voice layered and distorted.

“It’s me!” replied the (School) Miku in surprise.

Ichika’s eyes widened. “Two Mikus? Wait… Hazuki-kun, you know about SEKAI?!”

“Yeah, actually…” Yuu exhaled slowly, his tone shifting. “I have something to tell you.”

Something to tell me? What’s going on?

Before she could speak again—pain pierced through her skull like a needle.

“Argh!” Ichika gasped, clutching her head.

“Hoshino-san! What’s wrong!?”

“My… head!” she managed to say before her knees buckled.

“Miku! What’s happening to her!?”

“I… I don’t know!” the glitching Miku stammered, scanning her frantically. “It seems… some force is trying to get inside her mind!”

“What?!”

The world dimmed around Ichika. The voices blurred, swallowed by the pulsing in her ears.

My head… it hurts. It feels like I’m being stabbed by a needle…

She fell to her knees, trembling.

What’s going on right now? SEKAI? What the hell are they talking about? Bringing my true feelings out?

Her consciousness wavered.

You’re not some kind of hero… are you?

The pain suddenly vanished—like a string snapping. Her body slumped forward—

—but Yuu caught her just in time.

Her half-lidded eyes found his. His face blurred against the fading sunset.

I knew it… He looks familiar… Hazuki Yuu…

[Changing Perspective...]
Yuu Hazuki

“Damn it,” Yuu muttered under his breath, clenching his fist. “Just when I was about to tell her what’s going on…”

Ichika’s phone lay on the ground, the holographic Miku still flickering faintly above the cracked screen.

He crouched beside it, his reflection glimmering on the glass. “Wait… maybe…”

His thumb hesitated over the display — then tapped the screen, selecting the song.

‘Untitled.’

The first note rang out.

Instantly, the world shattered.

The noise of Kamiyama Street dissolved into silence, the light tearing away like paper in a storm. The air warped, bending around him until the city was gone, replaced by a sprawling classroom filled with endless rows of empty desks and chairs floating in a white void.

Yuu exhaled, lowering the phone. “It worked…”

A faint chime echoed beside him. A translucent interface appeared before his eyes, familiar in its sterile glow.

[Notification: School SEKAI is now available.]

“Good…” he muttered, the corner of his mouth twitching. “Thanks, game.”

His voice dripped with sarcasm.

Footsteps echoed behind him, soft, deliberate.

“What happened to Ichika?”

Her gaze was steady but laced with concern.

Yuu tapped the side of his smartwatch.

“Hey, Miku.”

The device buzzed softly before a flickering hologram emerged, static crawling along the edges of her outline. The glitching Miku appeared — her expression faint, distorted, yet still familiar.

“What happened?” he asked.

For a moment, only the hum of distortion answered.

Then her fragmented voice broke through, overlapping itself in echoes.

“I have no clue... but... for now...” her image flickered, “…it seems that she’s fine. I’m afraid she doesn’t need to know yet, Yuu.”

His gaze fell. “…So I can’t tell her yet.”

The silence that followed pressed heavy against the air — the kind that made the world itself hold its breath.

Yuu straightened, glancing toward the front of the classroom. One by one, figures began to appear — stepping through the haze as though drawn by his words.

Luka was the first, the faint glow from the window framing her in soft pink light.

Then came Miku, her usual bright presence subdued, followed by Rin and Len, their forms stabilizing beside the desks. MEIKO and KAITO arrived last, their digital voices carrying a subtle echo that filled the room.

“It seems you’re all here,” Yuu said quietly, slipping his hands into his pockets.

KAITO nodded, his tone calm but serious. “Yeah. We heard about the situation, what happened to Ichika Hoshino… and to you, Hazuki Yuu, right?”

He gave a small nod. “That’s me.”

The other Miku, the one from the School SEKAI, took a step forward, “Yuu-kun, please explain what’s going on.”

The glitching Miku turned toward him, their eyes meeting in silent understanding.

Yuu took a slow breath.

“…Alright.”

He raised his gaze, the faint shimmer of the SEKAI interface lighting his face as he began to speak.

As Yuu spoke, the room fell silent, the kind of silence that carried weight, as though every word he said bent the air around it.

He told them everything.

About the world he came from.

About that moment, everything had reset.
About his end goal: to return home.

The Vocaloids listened without interruption, their faces unreadable yet full of subtle tension.

He explained that there were other SEKAI.

Each one is connected to a group of people, each with its own version of Miku and the others. The glitching Miku beside him shimmered faintly, her unstable form the proof of that truth.

“She’s from my SEKAI,” Yuu said, glancing at her. “The one that shouldn’t exist anymore.”

He went on, describing fragments of memory — how they had all met him once before the reset, how the world had been rewritten. And then… the entity that ruled above it all.
A god in the shape of code and voice.
The one he challenged.

When he finally stopped talking, the faint hum of the classroom lights filled the air.

KAITO folded his arms, brows furrowing. “I see… I understand most of it, but not that part about you not belonging here. You’re saying… this isn’t your real world?”

Yuu’s eyes softened. “That’s right. But I can’t explain any more than that — not yet.”

He looked down at his hands, then up again with quiet resolve. “For now, every group’s SEKAI I know hasn’t awakened yet. I need to help them bring out their true feelings… so their worlds can be born again.”

Rin frowned. “Then… if everything’s reset, that means everyone’s free to choose again. Even to resist you.”

“That’s fine,” Yuu said, a faint smile curving his lips. “That’s what makes it real this time and... I'm sure that everyone's having a hard time as we speak."

MEIKO stepped forward, concern softening her tone. “Will you be alright?”

Yuu took a moment before answering. His gaze drifted toward the ceiling, where the faint digital sky shimmered above them.

“…Yeah,” he said quietly. “I’ll manage.”

A lie.

The air in the classroom shimmered faintly, fragments of light drifting through the digital haze like dust in sunlight.

Luka was the first to break the silence. Her voice carried a warmth that cut through the static.

“Slowly, my memories will recover,” she said, a small smile curving her lips. “But… it’ll take some time.”

Yuu met her gaze, and for the first time since arriving in this version of the world, he felt something stir — familiarity. Connection.

Luka stepped closer, folding her hands behind her back. “Welcome back, Hazuki-kun.”

For a heartbeat, Yuu didn’t respond. The words hit deeper than he expected — simple, but heavy with meaning.

Finally, he smiled faintly, almost to himself.

“…I’m back.”

Chapter 53: A New Path (Leo/Need)

“Huh…? Where am I?”

The first thing she saw was the ceiling.

Her ceiling.

“My… room?”

Ichika blinked against the morning light that spilled through the curtains. Everything looked normal — the faint hum of her alarm clock, the books stacked neatly on her desk, the familiar scent of detergent lingering in the air.

But something felt off.

Her thoughts slowly caught up to her memory — the street, the wind, Yuu’s voice—

—and then the sharp, stabbing pain in her head.

She pressed a hand to her temple, but the pain was gone.

Only confusion remained.

Slipping out of bed, she shuffled toward the door, her socks brushing against the wooden floor.

The aroma of breakfast drifted from the kitchen — miso soup, grilled fish, something sweet beneath the steam.

“Good morning,” a familiar voice greeted.

“Mm… good morning,” Ichika replied, taking her seat at the table. Her mother smiled softly, though her eyes carried a strange curiosity.

“What’s for breakfast?” Ichika asked, rubbing her eyes.

“Your favorite,” her mother said, placing a plate in front of her. Then, after a short pause, she added, “More importantly, Ichika, I have a question for you.”

Ichika blinked. “Eh? A question?”

Her mother hesitated for a moment — then smiled again, a touch forced.
“Yesterday… a friend of yours came here.”

[Flashback — Hoshino Residence]

“Coming~!”

The sound of hurried footsteps echoed down the hallway as Ichika’s mother opened the door — only to freeze in place.

Standing before her was a boy from Kamiyama High, slightly breathless, his uniform scuffed from running. On his back… was Ichika, sound asleep, her head resting gently against his shoulder.

“Wh–what happened to Ichika?!”

“C-Calm down, Mrs—” He stopped mid-sentence, adjusting her weight carefully before clearing his throat. “She’s fine. Just… exhausted.”

“E-Exhausted?”

“Th-that’s right! We were studying for the semester exams and she… fell asleep halfway through.” He laughed nervously. “Ah—sorry, I forgot to introduce myself. I’m Hazuki Yuu. From Kamiyama High.”

Her mother’s expression softened, worry giving way to faint relief. “I see… You must’ve gone through a lot carrying her all this way. Please, come in.”

“Ah—thank you.”

The boy smiled, stepping inside as the door quietly shut behind them.

[Flashback End]

“Eh?!

Hazuki-kun came to our house?! And he carried me all the way here?!”

Her mother blinked, suppressing a smile. “That’s right. I was wondering…” — her voice took on a teasing lilt — “are you two perhaps… dating?”

“Mom!? What’s with that conclusion?!”

Her mother chuckled, waving a hand. “He just seemed so worried about you, that’s all. You should thank him properly.”

Ichika pouted, face still flushed. “…Yes, mom.”

As her mother left the room, Ichika’s gaze drifted toward the window — sunlight spilling across her desk, where her phone rested quietly.

Hazuki-kun…

And then, without warning—

A different scene flashed before her eyes.

A mall.
Warm lights.
The echo of footsteps side by side.
Yuu’s voice, laughing softly beside her.

Ichika’s breath caught as she pressed a hand to her temple.

Huh? Was that… from my vision?

She shook her head as Ichika finished breakfast, the faint clink of her chopsticks echoing in the quiet kitchen.

She tidied her plate, murmured a word of thanks to her mother, and made her way to her room.

Standing before the mirror, she studied her reflection. Her face looked the same — calm, composed — yet something in her eyes wavered.

“Am I... forgetting something?” she whispered.

A silence hung in the air before she shook her head, forcing a small smile. “No... it’s nothing.”

By the time she left for school, the feeling had already started to fade.

And then...

Once again, Saki attempts to bridge the gaps that time and distance had left behind.

“Good morning, Shiho!” she called brightly, waving.

“...Morning,” Shiho replied without turning.

“Do you have time after school today? Because—”

“No. I’m working.”

Saki’s smile faltered. “Oh... there she goes...”

Honami passed by a moment later.

“Ah! Hona—”

“Hi, Honami!” one of her classmates called, intercepting her.

“H-Hi! Did you get your homework done this time?” Honami laughed nervously, disappearing into the crowd.

Saki sighed. “She’s gone too...”

That afternoon, Ichika found her sitting on a bench in the courtyard, knees drawn slightly together, gazing at the sky.

“Why are they both like that?” Saki muttered, her voice carrying a hint of loneliness. “It’s like they’re avoiding me.”

Ichika remained quiet, the words caught in her throat.

Saki turned to her, her eyes searching. “Ichi... did something happen when I was in the hospital?”

Ichika stiffened. “!!”

But Saki quickly waved her hands. “Never mind! I probably just caught them at a bad time.” Her cheer returned, fragile but determined. “I’ll try again later! Oh, I was wondering... do you still listen to Miku? Wait, that’s a silly question! Of course you do, with Yuu-kun, right?”

“W-well, I do listen even without him!” Ichika said hastily, cheeks warming.

“That’s cool! So, what’s hot recently? Can you recommend something?”

Ichika pulled out her phone and scrolled through her playlist. “Sure. Take a look at this. Anything here’s pretty good.”

Saki’s eyes wandered over the titles. “There’s one called Untitled? What’s this one about?”

“Untitled? Oh—Hazuki-kun sent that one to me... He said he wanted me to listen to it. But...” Ichika frowned. “I don’t remember adding this to my playlist—”

A sudden flash of white engulfed the screen.

“Eh—?! My eyes!” Saki yelped.

...

After the blinding light.

The two girls turned. The familiar school courtyard was gone, replaced by an eerily quiet campus under a summer-blue sky.

Ichika blinked rapidly. “What was that... Saki, are you okay?”

“Yeah, but... where are we?”

“We’re in school...” Ichika murmured.

Saki spun around, panic creeping into her voice. “Wha—?! I don’t recognize this place! How did we even get here?!”

Ichika frowned. “I don’t know... and it’s so quiet.”

The shrill cry of cicadas filled the silence.

“You hear that?” Ichika whispered. “Cicadas... but it’s not even the season.”

“I hear something else too,” Saki said, tilting her head. “Someone’s... playing guitar. And singing?”

Ichika’s eyes widened. “I might be imagining it... But it sounds like Miku.”

“You mean... someone’s playing a Miku song?”

“No,” Ichika said softly. “It is her.”

They followed the faint melody through the halls and soon found two familiar figures.

“Honami!? Shiho!?”

“Saki... Ichika...?” Shiho blinked, startled. “What are you two doing here?”

“We’re... not sure,” Ichika admitted.

Shiho sighed. “I see. I’m going to be late for work...”

“Um,” Honami said hesitantly, “I also suddenly ended up here somehow. Then I ran into Shiho. We heard singing and... decided to follow the sound.”

“Same here,” Saki said, smiling faintly. “Let’s go together.”

They approached a classroom door.

“The singing was coming from here,” Honami whispered.

Saki knocked lightly. “H-Hello? Is anybody—”

A bright, cheerful voice cut through the air.

“There you are at last! You sure kept me waiting!”

Another voice followed, playful and familiar. “Now, now... at least they’re here.”

A boy set down his electric guitar, exhaling. “Phew... Playing guitar’s kind of exhausting, y’know?”

“Miku...? And—Yuu-kun!?” Saki gasped.

Shiho frowned. “You two know each other?”

“What’s this supposed to be?” Honami asked, scanning the room.

“No way,” she muttered, “Is this... the same Miku from the app? It has to be a projection, right?”

Yuu scratched the back of his neck and grinned. “Haha... Nope, she’s real. You can even shake her hand if you want.”

“Shake her hand...?” Ichika whispered.

She stepped forward, trembling slightly. The sunlight streaming through the windows caught Miku’s hair, turning it into strands of glassy turquoise.

Ichika hesitated, then reached out.

Miku smiled.

Their hands met.

And in that instant, Ichika knew.

This was no dream.

Ichika’s breath caught as her fingers brushed against Miku’s.

Warm.

Solid.

Real.

“I can feel your hand!” she said, eyes wide in wonder. “You’re real! I saw you in a dream—and you looked just like this! I have so many questions!”

Beside her, Shiho frowned, crossing her arms. “Me too. First of all... what is this place?”

This,” Yuu said, his tone calm but assured, “is SEKAI—another world.”

“Another... world?” Ichika repeated, her voice trembling with disbelief.

Miku’s gentle smile radiated like sunlight. “Welcome to your SEKAI.”

Ichika blinked. “What do you mean?”

“It’s a world created by your feelings,” Miku said softly, her words carrying a dreamlike echo that seemed to blend with the quiet hum of the empty school halls.

Honami hesitated. “How... can that even be possible?”

Yuu stepped forward, resting one hand on a nearby desk. “SEKAIs are molded by what’s inside people’s hearts. Your emotions, the ones you hide or don’t understand, take form here. They even weave themselves into songs.” He gestured toward the walls around them. “That’s why some of this place feels familiar. It’s made from your memories.”

Saki tilted her head, her usual brightness dimmed by confusion. “But... how are you here, Yuu-kun? Are you... a virtual singer too?”

He laughed lightly. “Haha, nope. I’m the real deal, human through and through.”

Shiho’s brow furrowed. “I don’t understand any of this. If this is some kind of joke—! wait. What’s my bass doing here?” She turned, spotting her instrument resting neatly beside a chair. “I didn’t even take it out of its case.”

Ichika gasped. “My guitar’s here too! It should still be in my room at home!”

Saki pointed toward the back of the room. “Look! There’s a keyboard and drums too! It’s like someone set everything up for us already... for band practice!” Her eyes sparkled. “Speaking of which, I’d love for us to play together!”

Yuu chuckled. “Why not? You’re welcome to use the instruments.”

“Huh?” Ichika turned to him in surprise.

He smiled. “Isn’t that what you wanted to, Ichika-san? To play as a band again?”

Saki beamed. “You’re saying it’s okay to play here? That’s awesome! Let’s do it!”

“B-but...” Honami hesitated, clutching her drumsticks. “I promised a friend I’d meet her after school...”

“And I’ve got work,” Shiho muttered, already looking away. “Besides, there’s no song we’d all remember well enough to play.”

“There is one!” Saki said suddenly, eyes bright with hope. “That song we practiced together years ago!”

Shiho went still.

Honami’s lips parted. “...Yes. I remember that one.”

“Then let’s play it!” Saki said, her voice trembling with excitement. “We all know it, and it’s not difficult! Plus, it’s one of Miku’s songs, so it’s perfect!”

Miku tilted her head. “Oh, something I sang? I’d love to hear you play it.”

Yuu grinned. “I bet it’s great, right, Ichika-san?”

Ichika felt her pulse quicken under his gaze.

“You hear that?” Saki teased, smirking. “How can you say no, Ichi? Aren’t you up for it?”

“I... I want to try it,” Ichika admitted quietly. “I think it’d be really nice to play that song together again.”

Saki clapped her hands. “See? Ichi wants to play too! Shiho, Hona, don’t make me beg!”

Shiho sighed, rubbing her temple. “No, I’m leaving. How do I get out of this place? Miku, you must know.”

Miku looked toward Yuu for a moment, then smiled. “Yes, of course. But I’m not telling you until after you’ve performed the song.”

“What?” Shiho deadpanned.

“Hehe,” Miku giggled softly. “You’ve made me curious. I want to hear how you’ll play it.”

Shiho exhaled through her nose. “...Fine. If it’s just one song.”

Honami nodded timidly. “It’s been a long time, so I might not be very good... but I’ll try.”

“Yay!” Saki cheered, bouncing slightly. “Thank you!”

Ichika’s hands trembled as she reached for her guitar.

Then a memory resurfaced in her mind, Yuu’s voice.

I’ll help you find your true feelings. And once you do, your feelings will give birth to songs.

“Is everyone ready?” Saki called, clutching her keyboard stand. “Hold on—how do we start?”

Shiho sighed. “Honami, count us in.”

“O-okay... Here it goes,” Honami said, gripping her drumsticks tight. “One, two, three, four!”

The first notes rang through the classroom, soft, uneven, but alive.

Ichika thought, her heart pounding in rhythm with the melody.

Saki smiled as she played.

But then—

“Stop,” Shiho said sharply.

“Huh?” Ichika blinked.

“You’re falling behind,” Shiho said bluntly. “Follow Honami’s beat.”

“S-sorry...” Ichika murmured.

“This is exactly why I didn’t want to do this,” Shiho muttered.

Saki frowned. “B-but wasn’t it kind of good, considering? We actually synced up really well at the start!”

“I’m not interested in kind of good,” Shiho snapped. “You should know that.”

“Shiho, please...” Honami said softly. “No need to get so worked up. Let’s just try again—from the beginning, okay?”

Before they could start, Miku stepped forward. “Would you mind if I joined you this time?”

Ichika’s eyes widened. “You... want to play with us?”

“Yes,” Miku said, smiling warmly. “Do you not want me to?”

“N-no, that’s not it!” Ichika said, shaking her head. “It would be amazing if you played with us.”

“Watching you made me want to try an instrument again,” Miku said with a light laugh.

Shiho muttered under her breath. “Whatever... let’s just get this over with.”

Honami took a breath. “All right. One, two, three, four!”

This time, the sound was different.

Fuller.

Miku’s voice intertwined with the melody like wind through the trees, gentle, steady, guiding.

Honami thought, almost forgetting to keep tempo.

Saki realized, smiling through the rhythm.

Ichika thought, watching in awe.

When the final note faded, Miku lowered her instrument. “Thank you for letting me join. I could tell that this song means a lot to you.”

Shiho said nothing.

Ichika watched her quietly.

She shook her head softly.

“Okay, are we done?” Shiho said flatly. “Because I want to go back.”

“Wait!” Saki called out.

Shiho turned, annoyed. “What is it now?”

Saki’s eyes glimmered. “Shiho, Hona, Ichi... let’s get the band back together!”

“!!” Ichika froze.

“Us? Together again?” Honami murmured.

“You’re joking,” Shiho said immediately.

“Oh come on!” Saki pleaded. “We had so much fun just now! Wasn’t it fun, Shiho?”

“No, it wasn’t,” Shiho replied coldly.

Saki’s smile wavered, but she pressed on. “Even Miku noticed! This song means something to us. I think... deep down, you and Honami actually liked it too!”

Honami looked down at her drumsticks, silent.

“I don’t want to be in a band with you,” Shiho said finally. “Period.”

“Shiho...” Ichika whispered.

Honami sighed. “I’m sorry, but... I don’t think I want to either.”

“Hona... you too...” Saki’s voice broke.

Ichika thought, her chest tightening.

Shiho turned to Miku. “I’ve had enough. Tell me how to get out of here.”

Miku nodded solemnly. “Of course. You kept your promise, and I’ll keep mine. The song you played before you came here—‘Untitled’—that’s your key.”

Ichika blinked. “So... it was that track.”

Shiho scoffed. “That silent track got us here? Whatever. As long as I can leave.”

She turned sharply toward the door. “Bye.”

“Then... I’ll be going too,” Honami said softly, following her.

Saki stood frozen, her eyes glistening in the dim classroom light as their footsteps faded away.

Only the echo of their song remained.

Saki's voice trembled as she looked down at the ground, her hands tightening around her skirt. "Looks like… we're not all friends anymore."

The words hung in the air—heavy, painful, real. Ichika couldn't bring herself to answer. Her eyes wavered, lips parting slightly, but no sound came out.

Then Yuu spoke, his tone calm yet firm. "Are you two… giving up?"

Ichika blinked, startled. "Huh?"

He met her eyes. "Are you sure they don't want to be friends?"

Saki's gaze flickered with sudden life. The doubt in her face began to ease, replaced by a faint, fragile determination. "You're right," she said, voice regaining its warmth. "If I give up now, we'll lose any chance we might have at getting back together. I don't have a plan or anything, but I'm not giving up, that's for sure!"

Miku smiled softly beside Yuu, her hair shimmering faintly in the Sekai's pale light. "That's the way. And if you want to play together again, you can come here anytime."

Ichika hesitated, eyes darting between them. "...Miku, Hazuki-kun—can I ask you something?"

Miku tilted her head slightly. "Yes?"

"Why are you two here?" Ichika asked, her voice quiet, almost trembling.

"Songs," Miku began, her tone serene, "are crystallizations of feelings."

Ichika blinked. "Huh? Um… right…"

"Just like SEKAI," Miku continued, her eyes glowing faintly blue, "songs are born from feelings."

Yuu stepped forward, his voice cutting through the silence. "And didn't I tell you before that I'd help you?"

Miku nodded in agreement. "You and your friends need to find out what your true feelings are… for them to turn into a song."

Yuu's gaze softened as he added, in unison with Miku, "And we're here to guide you toward that truth."

He smiled faintly. "After all, Ichika-san… you're the protagonist, right?"

"Protagonist…?" Ichika repeated, her voice barely audible. Then she let out a shaky laugh, brushing away the moisture gathering in her eyes. "You're going to help us figure out our feelings…"

Miku's expression gentled. "I hope you can do it soon—you, and your friends."

The words broke something inside Ichika. Tears welled up until they blurred her vision, and before she could stop herself, she fell to her knees, sobbing quietly. The sound echoed faintly across the

empty Sekai.

Saki rushed to her side and wrapped an arm around her shoulders, comforting her as Ichika's tears fell freely.

Yuu and Miku watched silently.

"This," Yuu said softly, his voice filled with quiet certainty, "will be your first step, Ichika-san."

Chapter 54: The First Step to Goal! (Leo/Need)

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

Ichika sat at the edge of her bed, the faint morning glow sliding through her curtains. Her guitar case leaned quietly against the wall, and her fingers—almost unconsciously—brushed across her own palm as if trying to remember the touch of strings.

I can still feel it… the strings under my fingers.

Her reflection in the window looked back at her—soft, bewildered, hopeful.

<We met Miku… and we played a song together. It wasn't a dream.
We were all there—Saki, Honami, Shiho, and me. And it felt… fun like before.>

Her chest tightened.

Saki is smiling too brightly.

Honami's uncertain laugh.

<Shiho's curt voice hides something deeper.>

<We used to be a tight group, she thought, always together.>

<Maybe… if we got the band back together… just like Hazuki-kun said…>

"…things between us could go back to how they used to be."

She whispered it to the empty room, as if saying it aloud would make it true.

The Next Day

Miyamasuzaka Girls' Academy

"H-Hello, Shiho."

Shiho looked up from her phone, expression flat as a still lake.

"…Hey. Do you remember what happened yesterday?"

Honami nodded quickly. "Y-Yeah. It was so bizarre… I was so surprised."

"Yeah. I can't explain it."

"Neither can I…"

A brief silence. The distance between them felt enormous—but fragile.

“So,” Shiho said, quietly, “you still play drums?”

“Eh? Oh—yes.” Honami’s voice wavered. “I haven’t played for about half a year, though, so I’ve gotten rusty.”

Shiho glanced away, jaw shifting.

“That Untitled song… it appeared on my phone out of nowhere. You have it too?”

“Yes… I don’t know how it got there.” Honami’s fingers tightened. “Strange that it happened to both of us.”

“Yeah.” Shiho’s brows knitted. “Miku—or that person—said that the world was made from our feelings. Sounds like nonsense, but… if it’s true…”

Honami flinched at the word person.

<Is she talking about… Hazuki-kun…?>

“Do you have those feelings too?” Shiho asked suddenly.

“The same kind Ichika and Saki have?”

“M-Me…?”

Before she could form a real answer—

“Honami! Let’s go buy lunch!”

Honami jerked back. “O-Oh—sorry, I’ve got to go.”

Shiho’s face fell still.

Her classmates surrounded Honami instantly, like a different gravity had pulled her away.

“Yikes, Hinomori’s glaring again. Did she say something mean to you, Honami?”

Honami shook her head quickly. “No—no, it wasn’t like that—”

“She’s super scary. Total no-friends zone.”

“Yeah! And I heard she hangs out at some shady dive.”

“That’s not true,” Honami said too fast. “She just… works at a live house.”

“Oh? Are you guys friends then?”

Honami froze.

You act chummy with just about anyone. Whose side are you on?

The memory hit like cold water.

“N-No. I just… heard from someone.”

They left.

Shiho watched from a distance—expression unreadable.

“…Pathetic.”

Footsteps.

A soft, familiar voice.

Warm.

“My, if it isn’t my sweet Shii.”

Shiho stiffened. “Shizuku? What are you doing in the first-years’ hallway…? People are already staring.”

Whispers rose immediately.

“It’s Shizuku Hinomori…”
“She’s even prettier up close…”

Shizuku smiled, gentle as always, yet her eyes sharpened with concern.

“Hehe. I was on my way to see a friend. But… Shii, is something wrong? You’re even more sullen than usual.”

Shiho looked away, shoulders tense.

“…I’m fine. I told you not to talk to me at school.”

Shizuku stepped closer, voice lowering.

“Shii… You don’t look fine to me.”

Shiho didn’t answer.

Miyamasuzaka Girls’ Academy — Class 1-C

Sunlight poured in through the tall windows, casting warm rectangles across the polished desks. The classroom buzzed faintly with morning chatter, but at the center of it all were two girls—seated close enough that their shoulders nearly touched.

Saki leaned forward, her eyes sparkling with an excitement she could barely contain.

“Yesterday was amaaaazing! And it really happened, right?” She waved her phone with both hands, nearly dropping it in her enthusiasm. “Ichi, look! I have ‘Untitled’ on my phone too! Shiho and Hona must have it as well!”

Ichika blinked softly, her voice small but sincere.
“Yeah… I think so.”

“It’s so strange that the same track just… appeared like that,” Saki continued, her tone brimming with wonder. “But it kinda feels nice! Like we’re connected in a way only we can understand! Do you think it's what Miku meant—about shared feelings?” She pressed a finger to her lips, thinking. “If we really share those feelings with Shiho and Hona, then maybe… maybe…”

Her voice trailed.

The brightness in her expression dimmed.

“But… they did turn down my idea to get the band back together,” she whispered. “So maybe I was wrong about all that.”

The silence that followed was soft—not awkward, just heavy. Ichika stared at the surface of her desk, fingers lightly gripping the edge.

Something in her chest flickered—small, uncertain, but persistent.

“Saki,” Ichika said quietly. “I was just thinking…”

Saki tilted her head, ruby-pink eyes wide with attention.

“…Why don’t we start a band?” Ichika continued. “Just the two of us.”

Saki froze—then practically exploded with joy.

“Wh—what?! You mean it?! For real?!”

Ichika allowed herself a tiny, fragile smile.
“Yeah. Even if it’s only two people… we can still try.”

“No, no—that’s totally fine!!” Saki laughed, her voice bubbling over like a shaken soda. “I’m so happy! Thank you, Ichi! And—and maybe, once they see how much fun we’re having, Shiho and Hona will want to join us too!”

Ichika nodded.
“Yeah. Maybe. Let’s try. Let’s see how far we can go.”

<A band… with Saki. If she isn’t giving up, then I won’t either. If there’s even a chance—no matter how small—I’ll walk toward it with her.>

Saki then paused, her excitement softening just slightly.
“But… um, Ichi? How do we even start with just the two of us?”

Ichika allowed herself a steady breath, like resolving something deeper.

“…I think I know someone we can ask.”

And just like that—

The day moved forward...

[Switching Perspective to Yuu Hazuki - School Sekai]

The familiar pastel-blue sky of the School SEKAI shimmered beyond the windows, quiet and calm. Yuu sat at the edge of a long wooden desk, gaze soft as Miku and Luka stood before him, sunlight diffusing around them like watercolor.

“How’s progression going, Yuu?” School SEKAI Miku asked, leaning slightly forward, her voice light but earnest.

Yuu let out a slow breath.

“Progression, huh…? If you mean them, Ichika-san, Saki-san, Hinomori-san, and Mochizuki-san, I don’t think I should step in directly right now. For the moment, I should just watch… and support from the side.”

“Oh! How mature of you,” Luka teased with a gentle smile, hands on her hips.

“But,” Yuu continued, turning his gaze toward the window, “I still have to access the other SEKAI. Slowly… I need to connect them all.”

Luka’s eyes glimmered with interest.

“Ohhh. You mean the versions of us—the ones with different personalities and feelings, right?”

“Yep.”

Miku perked up immediately, excitement bubbling.

“Say, say—how do I look in the other SEKAI?”

Yuu’s smile softened as he sat on the windowsill.

“Well… There are five SEKAI, including mine.”

He counted them off on his fingers.

“Stage SEKAI’s Miku is warm—like an older sister who cheers you on.
Street SEKAI’s Miku is cool, confident… honest.
Wonderland SEKAI’s Miku is playful, lively, almost like a mischievous performer.
And 25-ji SEKAI’s Miku… she’s quiet. Fragile. Dreamlike. Like she’s always drifting somewhere just beyond reach.”

Miku’s eyes sparkled.
“I want to meet them! All of them!”

“So do I,” Luka chimed in, folding her arms behind her head. “I want to meet myself in those worlds, too.”

Yuu laughed softly.

“Someday. When the time is right."

[Switching back to Ichika Hoshino – School SEKAI]

The sliding classroom door rattled softly as Saki pushed it open, sunlight spilling across the wooden floor.

“It really worked!” Saki beamed. “We can come here anytime!”

“I was wondering the same thing,” Ichika murmured. “But… I guess if Miku said it’s okay…”

“Obviously!” Saki grinned. “We wouldn’t have started a band if it weren’t for her. We owe her a thank-you!”

Ichika smiled lightly.

“…You always take the first step. That’s something I really admire about you.”

“And I know, right?” Saki puffed her chest.

But before either could say more—

“Huh—Hazuki-kun?!”

Ichika blinked as her eyes fell on the boy sitting near the windows.

Yuu turned, calm as always.

“Ah. Ichika-san. Tenma-san.”

Miku raised a hand, her voice gentle.

“Welcome back, Ichika. Saki. I’m glad you came.”

“And Luka’s here too!” Saki said brightly.

“Hello,” Luka waved. “It’s nice to see both of you.”

Ichika hesitated.

“We came without asking… I hope it’s alright.”

“You never need permission,” Miku assured. “Though… what about Shiho and Honami?”

Saki paused, but her smile didn’t dim.

“They didn’t come this time—but someday, I’m sure we’ll all meet here together!”

“That will be something to look forward to,” Miku said warmly.

Luka and Yuu nodded quietly beside her.

Saki clasped her hands before her chest.

“We actually came here today to say something!”

“Oh?” Miku tilted her head. “We’re listening.”

Saki’s voice burst with joy.

“Ichika and I started a band!”

Miku smiled—soft, proud, unsurprised.

“I had a feeling. You two played beautifully together.”

“Hehe… thank you!” Saki flushed. “We have a long way to go though. I can play piano, but synthesizers are a different story…”

“I can only manage chords,” Ichika added. “I’ll have to practice a lot.”

“Then,” Miku said, a gentle breeze seeming to lift her voice, “Would you like to practice here? The four of us.”

Ichika blinked.

“Four…?”

“That’s right,” Luka stepped forward, resting her guitar on her shoulder. “I’m here too.”

Saki gasped.
“I didn’t realize you were also a Virtual Singer here!”

“Miku and I often play together,” Luka smiled. “I can teach you guitar, synth, arrangement—whatever you need.”

Ichika’s eyes widened in awe.

“You’ll… mentor us?”

Before they could respond, Yuu stood, offering a soft wave.

“Well then—I should go. Can’t let myself get spoiled by watching the future unfold too early.”

Miku giggled lightly.

“Bye-bye, Hazuki-kun.”

Yuu stepped out, the door sliding shut behind him.

Luka clapped once, grinning.

“Alright. Are you two ready for some intense training?”

Saki gulped.

“E-Even if it's tough… we’ll do our best!”

Luka laughed warmly.

“I’m joking. Let’s have fun. Music grows from joy, after all.”

Ichika and Saki stood close to Luka and Miku, the atmosphere warm—yet faintly fragile.

Luka tilted her head, thoughtful.

“I had thought there would be more of you. Miku told me you had two other friends who played with you before.”

A silence settled, thin and delicate.

Ichika lowered her gaze.

“...They’re not coming this time.”

Luka nodded slowly, her expression softening.
“Ah. I see. It must be… complicated.”

Saki laced her fingers together, her voice carrying both brightness and a tremor. “We’ve been friends since we were little. The four of us were always together—playing, laughing, making plans… Everything felt so easy back then. But when I had to stay in the hospital for a long time…”

Her voice thinned. "When I came back… Shiho and Honami wouldn’t talk to me anymore.”

“That’s… very sad.” Luka’s tone was gentle, but steady. “I wonder why they feel unable to speak to you now.”

Saki shook her head.

“I wish I knew. But they won’t say anything.”

Ichika exhaled, a quiet sigh from a tightly held heart.

Miku stepped forward, her voice soft like the breeze from the open window.

“Sometimes… the hardest things to say are the ones we feel most deeply. Especially to someone precious to us.”

Ichika’s breath caught.

“Yes… That’s true…”

Miku smiled tenderly.

“You still want to be friends with them, don’t you? You’re not giving up.”

Saki nodded, small at first, then bright and firm.

“Of course! I won’t ever give up!”

“Then,” Luka said, voice like a gentle chord, “if that wish is sincere, it will lead you back to them —when the time is right.”

Saki’s eyes gleamed with renewed hope.

“Hehe… Hearing you say that makes me believe it’ll really happen!”

Miku placed her hand lightly over her heart.

“Then keep believing.”

Saki straightened.

“Right! Let’s practice a lot! That way, when Shiho and Honami come back, we can play together just like before!”

Ichika smiled, small, but real.

“Yeah. Let’s do our best.”

They began to practice.

Keys clicked, strings wavered; melodies stumbled, wavered, and reformed.

Then—

“Ugh—! I can’t do it!” Saki whined, half laughing, half collapsing over the synthesizer. “This is way harder than I thought! Luka, I’m so sorry! I’m… really not good at this.”

Luka laughed softly, warmth without judgment.

“It’s alright. Piano and synthesizer may look similar, but they’re very different. Your hands need time to learn how to move. Don’t rush—your pace is fine.”

Saki lifted her head, determination glowing behind her frustration.

“Thank you, Luka! Shiho’s always so good at playing… I want to catch up. I want to play alongside her again!”

“Then keep practicing,” Luka replied, her smile kind and certain. “You’ll reach her.”

Ichika watched Saki—her messy determination, her bright grin returning.

<She’s really enjoying this.
But I know… she’d be even happier if Honami and Shiho were here too.
No. Not yet. Don’t lose focus.
We need to become stronger first—so that when they come back… we’ll be ready to welcome them with open arms.>

Ichika took a breath and placed her fingers on the keys.

“Let’s keep going,” she said softly.

And the music began again.

…
…

Meanwhile — from someone’s perspective.

I really can’t leave them alone, can I? No matter the scenario… I end up stepping in anyway.

He stood just beyond the café window, where warm afternoon light spilled across polished tables and quiet chatter.

And there she was, exactly where he’d been predicted, buying something on the counter.

“So she really was here…” he murmured, more to confirm his own resolve than anything else.

He drew in a breath.

Shoulders squared.

Footsteps steady.

With practiced timing, he opened the door — the bell chimed softly overhead.

He approached the counter.

"Excuse me, can I get an apple pie?" he said casually, as though nothing were out of the ordinary.

She turned at the sound of his voice — her reaction immediate, sharp.

"Eh—?! You?!"

His gaze met hers, calm, unreadable.

"Oh? If it isn't…"

A faint hint of a smile.

"Ichika's friend?"

Chapter End Notes

Man, I had to rewrite this again because the Rich Text messed up the text, then made sure there's no repeated words, and I'll be honest, I think I'm starting to lose touch with my writing, so... I kinda need some advice from you guys! That'll be great! [Also, it's currently 5:36 AM here...] By the time I published this it's probably around 5:50 AM? Anyway, I'm gonna sleep now! Thank you, and take care

P.S: You shouldn't worry about the future :D
(Update#1: ALSO 101 KUDOS LET'S GOO!!! If you see ANY errors or confusions, let me know)

Chapter 55: It Doesn't Taste Sweet (Leo/Need)

Chapter Notes

> This chapter contains a scene depicting suicidal thoughts and an attempted suicide.
>
> Please read with care. If you or someone you know is struggling, remember that you are not alone.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

The warm scent of baked apples and sugar lingered in the air, curling through the quiet café as the late afternoon light spilled through the windows.

“Eh—?! You?!”

Honami’s voice broke through the hum of the shop, her eyes wide in disbelief.

His gaze met hers—steady, unreadable, like a rippleless pond.

“Oh? If it isn’t…” he paused, lips curving into a faint, knowing smile. “Ichika’s friend?”

“Y-you’re that guy… with Miku…” she stammered.

He tilted his head slightly, as though remembering something. “Ah, right. I never introduced myself, did I?” He placed a hand over his chest with a small, polite bow. “My name is Yuu Hazuki.”

“M-mm… Honami Mochizuki,” she replied, her voice soft and careful.

Yuu’s eyes flickered toward the small paper bag she held close to her side.
“Are those… apple pies?”

“Ah—yes.” She glanced down at the bag, flustered.

Honami laughed, scratching her cheek in embarrassment. “Haha… I tend to eat a lot of these.”

“Hmmm.” He smiled faintly, amused.

The counter staff approached with a cheerful tone.
“Here’s your apple pie, young sir.”

They placed a small white box onto the counter and slipped it neatly into another matching bag.

“Ah, thank you~” Yuu said, tapping his phone against the scanner.

A soft chime followed—Payment successful. Come again!

Moments later, the door's bell chimed again as they stepped out together into the mild afternoon breeze.

The air outside was crisp, carrying the faint sweetness from the paper bag in Honami's hands.

"Do you also like… apple pie?" she asked, glancing sideways at him.

"Well," Yuu said thoughtfully, "I've generally heard they taste great. I wonder if they're really—"

"They are!" she blurted out before he could finish.

Her sudden outburst made him laugh softly.

"Ahahaha… I see. Should I try, then?"

He opened the box slightly, a faint curl of steam escaping.

The golden crust glistened faintly in the sunlight, the scent of butter and apple filling the air between them

With that, Yuu reached into the box, carefully picking up a slice of the warm apple pie. The crust was still soft from the oven, its buttery scent mingling with the faint chill of the air outside.

He lifted it closer and took a slow breath in.

"What… are you doing?" Honami asked, blinking at him in disbelief.

He smiled, eyes half-lidded as though savoring something more than the scent itself.

"I love the smell. It's… kind of addicting."

"I-I know that," she said, flustered, "but it's weird to just, sniff it right away!"

"Ah… you're right," Yuu admitted with a sheepish laugh, lowering the slice.

A soft breeze brushed past, carrying the sweetness of baked apples between them. Then, without another word, he leaned forward and took a small bite from the tip of the pie.

The crust gave way with a quiet crunch, releasing the warmth of cinnamon and sugar across his tongue.

His eyes widened slightly, surprised, maybe even impressed.

"Mmm… This is great! No—this is beyond greatness!"

The taste lingered on his tongue—sweet and warm, balanced with the tang of cooked apple, the gentle bite of cinnamon and nutmeg, and a buttery, flaky crust that melted away almost too easily.

Honami couldn't help but laugh, covering her mouth. "Are you—are you a food critic, perhaps?" she teased.

"Sorry," Yuu said sheepishly, "it was just really good."

"Right?" she beamed.

Just then, a familiar voice cut through the street noise.

“There you are, Hazuki-kun!”

Ichika approached, her expression brightening—only to freeze when she noticed the girl beside him.

“Honami…?”

“Ichika…!”

Yuu rubbed the back of his neck awkwardly. “Oh, sorry! I found her in the same shop you told me about.”

Ichika blinked, then looked down. “Wait—is that apple pie you’re eating?!”

“I can’t help it,” Yuu said with a laugh. “When Mochizuki-san told me how good they were, I just had to try.”

Ichika and Honami stared at each other.

He sensed the sudden tension between the two girls and, with a knowing smile, leaned closer to Ichika.

“I’ll leave you two be for a bit… Ichika-san,” he whispered, gently patting her shoulder before walking off.

Ichika watched him disappear down the street, then turned back to Honami.

“I remember you used to get them often,” Ichika said softly. “So you still like them a lot.”

“Yes… I can’t get enough,” Honami replied, smiling faintly.

Ichika hesitated. “Saki and I went to Miku’s place again today. We played Untitled—and it took us there. Also, we decided to start a band.”

“Oh, just the two of you?”

“Yeah. But…” Ichika looked hopeful. “You’re welcome to join, if you’d like?”

Honami’s expression faltered. “I… I think I’ll pass.”

“I figured you’d say that,” Ichika murmured.

“Sorry,” Honami said, clutching the paper bag to her chest. “I-I was just on my way to buy something. I’d better go.”

“Sure. See you around, Honami.”

With that, Honami turned and walked away, her figure swallowed by the late afternoon crowd.

From behind the corner, Yuu watched silently, still chewing on the last bite of pie in his hand.

“So in the end,” he murmured, “Honami won’t reveal her feelings, huh…”

He sighed quietly before fading from the street—his figure vanishing back into the Sekai.

[Scene: Kamiyama Street — Night]

Perspective: Honami Mochizuki

The city lights shimmered faintly on the wet pavement as Honami exhaled a quiet sigh.

“How much longer do I have to keep this up…” she murmured, looking up at the starless sky. “I can’t see any stars tonight.”

Her thoughts drifted back to the noise of the classroom.

[Flashback]

“Honami, mind if I rant a bit?”
A girl’s voice—sharp, exasperated. “That girl from my club was so mean to me. Listen…”

Honami smiled softly, patient as ever. “So that’s what happened. Are you okay? Try to calm down.”

Another day.

Another voice.

“And like, how could she say that to my face? What did I even do?”

“Oh, I see… That’s kind of sad to hear…”

Then—

“Honami, you got a moment?” a third classmate asked, her tone tight with accusation. “I heard you were talking crap about me after class yesterday.”

“What? I’d never—”

“Two girls from my club said you agreed with them when they badmouthed me. Whose side are you on, huh?”

“I… I wasn’t taking sides…”

“I heard you always tell people what they want to hear,” the girl sneered. “Some people-pleaser you are.”

“That’s not… I just didn’t want them to feel alone when they were hurting—”

“A friend to everybody is a friend to nobody,” she spat. “You thought you could make everyone like you by nodding and smiling, huh?”

Honami’s words faltered. “…No, it wasn’t like that…”

Later, she walked through the hallway, her gaze fixed on the floor.

“Honami…”

She looked up. “Oh, Ichika…”

“Are you sure you’re all right?” Ichika asked gently. “If you don’t want to talk now, that’s fine—but know that you can always count on me. That’s what friends are for.”

“Thank you, Ichika…” Honami smiled faintly.

“I’ll see you later, okay?” Ichika said with a small wave before heading off.

“Yeah…”

But as Honami neared her classroom, she heard whispers spilling from inside.

“Was that Honami chatting with someone in the hall?” one classmate snickered. “I swear she was saying we’re bullying her.”

“Pfft! I gave her a piece of my mind for being such a bootlicker, and now she’s acting all hurt,” another chimed in. “She just wants to play the victim. That friend of hers—same type, taking her side without even knowing what happened.”

“I see Honami talking to that girl all the time,” a third voice added. “Her name’s Hoshino.”

Honami froze in the doorway.

Her chest tightened.

[After School]

“Honami!”

Honami turned at the sound of her name.

“Want to walk home together? There’s a new bakery we could stop by on the way.”

“I’m sorry, Ichika…” Honami said quietly, eyes downcast. “Please don’t talk to me at school anymore.”

“What? Why not?”

“I already made up with my classmates, so… you don’t have to worry about me, okay?”

“Honami, I don’t get it—wait!”

But by then, Honami was already walking away, her shadow stretching thin under the fading sunset.

[Flashback Ends]

“I… can’t keep up with this act anymore.”
Her voice trembled—barely a whisper, yet it carried the weight of months she had buried beneath a fragile smile.

The tears came quietly, tracing the curve of her cheek before vanishing into the cold air.

And then—

“You won’t be able to go back to them.”
“Come on, Honami, we’re your true friends.”
“Go with us, Honami!”

The voices crept in—soft at first, like echoes from a memory. Then they swelled, wrapping around her, pressing into her thoughts until all she could hear was them.

Her breath grew shallow. The world around her began to blur—streetlights melting into streaks of gold, the night wind howling through the stillness. Her eyes dulled, losing their warmth.

“Mm… I’ll go…”

Step by step, she moved forward—mechanical, unthinking. The pavement beneath her shoes was slick with dew, the sound of each step fading into the distance.

“Honami! Come!”
“Follow us!”

Her pace quickened until the ground simply… stopped.

She stood at the edge of the bridge, the city’s reflection trembling in the dark water below. The cold breeze tugged at her hair, carrying away the last fragments of hesitation.

She tilted her head upward, gaze lost in the faint shimmer of distant stars.

“The stars… are beautiful tonight…”

And then—she leaned forward.

The world dropped away.

…

…

A sudden rush of wind.

A sharp gasp.

“What are you doing!?”

The weight of another’s hand pulled her back—strong, desperate.

Yuu’s voice tore through the night like a shock of thunder.

“HONAMI MOCHIZUKI!”

He had caught her—arms trembling, heart pounding, as the roar of the river below echoed beneath them.

“Please… let go of me…”

Her voice broke, trembling like glass on the verge of shattering. “I can’t do this anymore.”

“Yes!” His voice cracked through the rain-stained air. “YES, YOU CAN!”

[Transition to Yuu’s perspective]

Yuu’s fingers dug into Honami’s wrist, knuckles pale, veins trembling beneath his skin.

“Please… Honami…” he choked, pulling her closer to him, feeling her weight slowly slip from his grasp. “Get up! You can still fix this!”

But she didn’t move. Her gaze had gone distant—glassy, detached, as if she were staring through him, through the world itself.

“Say… Yuu…” she whispered softly, lips trembling into a faint smile.

He froze. “…Huh?”

“Every time… I eat that apple pie…” Her eyes wavered, heavy with unshed tears. “…it just doesn’t taste sweet anymore.”

The words sank like stones into his chest.

“What are you talking about…?” he whispered, voice breaking. “Honami—”

She closed her eyes, the faintest shimmer of warmth crossing her face—gentle, resigned. “I’m sorry… please…”

Her fingers loosened around his.

And before he could even breathe—

Her hands slipped away.

“No—”

Yuu lunged forward, desperate, his fingers grasping at the empty air as her figure fell from his reach. The world seemed to slow, sound draining away until only the dull pounding of his heartbeat filled the void.

“No! HONAMI!”

His voice tore through the silence, echoing into nothing. The spot where she had stood moments ago now swallowed by the night.

“No… Is this… what they said…?” His voice quivered, barely a whisper against the roaring in his ears.

<…Why?>

And then—

[Update Patch: Honami Mochizuki has been removed from the game.]

The words blinked across his vision like a cruel omen—cold, mechanical, absolute.

Yuu's breath caught. His trembling hands hovered before him, pale under the digital glow, as if still reaching for someone who no longer existed. The realization sank in like ice.

"If only…" he whispered, voice cracking. "If only I could go back in time…!"

The plea hung in the air, raw and powerless—swallowed by the void that had taken her away.

Before the thought could form, the world around him rippled.

The cold air, the sound of rushing water—all of it fractured into fragments of color.

And suddenly—

"Yuu-kun? Are you okay?"

He blinked.

Warm light filtered in from the windows of School SEKAI, the faint smell of apples and cinnamon lingering in the air.

Saki sat across from him, a slice of pie in her hands, smiling softly.

Beside her, Miku tilted her head, eyes filled with quiet concern.

"Are you okay, Yuu? You look pale," she asked gently.

Yuu froze, staring blankly at the half-eaten pie before him.

The name tore out of him like a reflex.
"Honami!"

Before anyone could react, Yuu pushed back his chair, nearly knocking it over. His pulse thundered in his ears.

Without another word, he bolted out of the SEKAI—

The world dissolving into static as he crossed the boundary.

He emerged into the chill of Kamiyama Street, the night wind biting against his face.

His footsteps echoed down the empty road as he ran, eyes searching every shadow, every flicker of light.

"Honami… where are you…?" he whispered, voice trembling, heart pounding with something that felt like both fear—

After a while, he finally saw her.

There, beneath the dim orange glow of a streetlamp, Honami Mochizuki stood, her steps small and unsteady.

The night breeze tugged gently at her hair, carrying her voice with it.

“I… can’t keep up with this act anymore."

Yuu froze where he stood, breath catching.

For a moment, all he could hear was the wind between them, soft, trembling, lonely.

Then he called out to her, his voice cracking through the silence.

“Then… be honest!”

Honami stopped.

Slowly, she turned, her wide eyes glinting faintly in the streetlight, surprise, exhaustion, sorrow, all swirling together.

Ahh… there she was.

The real Honami.

Her fragile feelings, stripped bare under the night sky.

Yuu took a careful step forward. Then another.

His voice softened.

“You don’t have to keep pretending anymore,” he said, closing the distance between them. “You can just… be honest.”

Her voice broke as she spoke, trembling with every word.

“But… I’m scared!” Honami’s hands clenched at her chest, as though trying to hold herself together. Tears streamed down her cheeks, glistening faintly under the streetlight. “I don’t want my classmates to whisper things behind my back, or laugh at me, or ignore me!”

Her shoulders shook, her breath catching between sobs. “It felt so awful… I don’t want to go through that ever again!”

The words spilled out like a flood—raw, unrestrained.

“I don’t want them to call me a bootlicker, or a people-pleaser who’s friends with everybody and friends with nobody!”

Her voice cracked on the last word, the pain carrying across the quiet street and vanishing into the night air. “So… I decided to prove my loyalty to them by not having friends outside our class.”

Her shoulders shook as she lowered her head, trembling. The streetlights bathed her in pale gold, glinting against the tears slipping down her cheeks. “I thought… maybe then they’d stop hating me.”

The silence that followed was suffocating. Only her quiet sobs and the faint hum of passing cars filled the distance between them.

“I don’t even know what friendship is anymore…” she whispered, voice breaking into a fragile tremor.

“Mochizuki-san…” Yuu’s voice was soft—hesitant. Then firmer. “No… Honami-san.”

She lifted her head slightly, eyes glistening with confusion and exhaustion.

“I…” he began, but the words faltered in his throat.

He took a slow step forward, meeting her gaze beneath the dim streetlight.

“Then…” he said quietly, his voice steadying, “are you going to keep evading everyone?”

Her breath hitched. “Evading… everyone?” she repeated faintly, as if the words themselves stung.

She took a shaky step back, clutching her sleeve. “You don’t understand…!” Her voice quivered, rising with the weight of everything she’d held back. “It’s not that simple!”

Tears welled again, blurring the light around her. “If I keep my distance, at least no one gets hurt. At least no one talks about me behind my back. At least—”

Her words cracked, dissolving into a sob. “At least… I won’t be the one ruining everything again…”

He stepped closer, his shadow stretching toward hers on the pavement. “You think avoiding everyone will make the pain stop?”

Honami’s lips parted, but no words came out.

“It won’t,” Yuu said, his tone quiet but firm. “You’ll just keep carrying it… until it breaks you completely.”

Her eyes widened. The night wind brushed past them, cool against their faces.

“Then what am I supposed to do…?” she whispered. “Smile like nothing’s wrong? Pretend everything’s fine when it’s not?”

Yuu shook his head slowly. “No. Be honest. Cry if you have to. Scream. Fall apart. But don’t disappear. Because someone out there still wants to see you smile—genuinely.”

The silence that followed was trembling and fragile. Honami’s tears shimmered under the streetlight as her voice, barely a whisper, escaped her lips.

“…Even if I’ve already hurt them?”

“Especially then.”

Her eyes widened—staring at Yuu as though seeing him for the first time.

<…I will take responsibility>, he thought, his gaze steady even as the night wind tugged at his hair.

“Right now,” he said softly, “I want to see your true feelings.”

Honami froze. Her eyes—wide, shimmering with confusion and fear—searched his face for a moment before her composure broke entirely. She stumbled forward, clutching his shirt, and buried her face into his shoulder.

Her sobs came uneven, raw.

Each breath trembled against him like something fragile trying to find its place again.

Yuu closed his eyes. His hand rested gently on her back, steady, grounding.

"…Yeah," he murmured, a faint smile tugging at his lips. "At least you're honest now."

He looked up. The night sky above Kamiyama stretched wide and silent, a scattering of faint stars struggling to pierce through the haze.

"Honami-san?" he whispered when her weight suddenly slackened.

Her body slumped gently forward, unconscious, but still breathing, collapsing against his chest.

"From now on," he said quietly, voice trembling between hope and exhaustion, "everything will be… alright. Right?"

The device gave no answer—only a soft pulse of light.

But what just happened…?

I have so many questions…

He adjusted his grip around Honami, cradling her gently.

"For now," he whispered, stepping into the quiet streetlight glow, "I should get Honami back home."

He took a step—then another—uncertain of where the path would lead.

"But…Where…?"

Chapter End Notes

First time writing this kind of chapter.

Chapter 56

The street felt quieter now.

Yuu blinked, breath still unsteady, Honami's weight resting softly in his arms. Her earlier sobs had dissolved into faint, exhausted breaths—the kind that linger after a heart finally stops holding itself together.

The night wind brushed past them, cool and gentle, as if trying to soothe the remnants of panic clinging to the air.

Honami stirred.

A small sound escaped her, eyelids fluttering before she slowly blinked awake.

"Where…?"

"Oh—! Mochizuki-san, you're awake!" Yuu straightened instinctively, tightening his hold just enough so she wouldn't slip.

Honami looked around in a haze. "Uhm… what happened?"

"…Hmm…" Yuu scratched his cheek, unsure how much to explain. "You were crying in my arms, remember?"

She nodded absently—until the words finally caught up to her.

Her eyes widened.

"EH?! Wait—why are you carrying me?!"

"Huh?" Yuu blinked. "We're going to Ichika-san's house…"

"…I see." Honami's voice softened, gaze lowering. "Are you perhaps…"

Can I even say it?
Is it rude?
She hesitated, lips parting, then quietly closed again. After a moment, she cleared her throat and forced a small smile.

"Please take care of Ichika."

"What are you talking about?" Yuu tilted his head.

"N–Nothing," she said quickly, brushing the moment aside—even though her cheeks betrayed the faintest hint of pink.

"So… uhm… are you going to join Ichika-san and Saki-san's band?" Yuu asked, shifting Honami gently in his arms as they walked.

"…I don't know," she murmured.

“Hmmm… still hesitant?”

“I… at least want to open up my feelings to my classmates first.”

“I see,” Yuu said softly. “So you will join." Yuu smiled afterwards, "I’m looking forward to it—your music, and everyone else’s.”

Honami’s fingers curled lightly over her sleeve.

She hesitated, then spoke again, voice small but steady:

“…Say, Hazuki-kun… have we… met before?”

Yuu stopped.

The night breeze brushed past them, rustling the leaves as he lifted his gaze to the sky.

“I feel like I’ve heard this question many times,” he said with a faint, wistful smile. “But… maybe we have.”

Honami looked up at him—then followed his gaze to the open sky above, where countless stars shimmered like scattered pieces of glass.

“The stars are pretty tonight,” she whispered.

“Yeah,” Yuu agreed, the weight of both relief and mystery settling gently in his chest. “They really are.”

As they walked up the quiet residential street, the warm porch light of the Hoshino household glowed like a small beacon.

Ichika stood in front of the door, hands clasped anxiously in front of her chest.

“Honami! Hazuki-kun!”

Yuu blinked. “You were waiting for us?”

“Of course!” Ichika hurried forward, eyes wide with worry. “I got really worried when you said Honami was crying.”

“W-Wait— You told her?!” Honami’s face flushed pink.

“Well,” Yuu shrugged lightly, “eventually you’ll tell her the truth, right? Soooo…”

Honami puffed her cheeks, but she didn’t complain further.

Yuu crouched down gently, letting Honami slide off his back. Her feet touched the ground, unsteady but firm.

“I’ll leave you two now,” Yuu said softly, turning to go.

“Wait.”

Ichika’s voice cut through the air. Yuu paused, turning back toward her.

“What is it?”

“…You’re coming in with me,” she said firmly, eyes narrowing in gentle insistence. “You’re telling me what’s going on.”

“E–Ehh? Can’t Mochizuki-san just explain… everything?”

“Well…” Honami looked between them, caught like a deer in headlights, unsure whose side to stand on.

“Nope,” Ichika said, decisive as ever. “You’re coming inside, Hazuki-kun. And—it’s night. You shouldn’t be walking around alone anyway.”

Yuu opened his mouth to protest, but—

“Ichika, what’s with the noise all of a sudd—oh?”

Ichika’s mother poked her head out from the hallway, her face softening immediately.

“Oh! Honami-chan, it’s been so long—it’s so good to see you again!”

Her gaze shifted.

“And if it isn’t the boy who carried Ichika home last time.”

Yuu straightened instinctively. “H-Hello, Miss Hoshino.”

“Good evening…” Honami bowed, politely flustered.

“Come in, come in!” Mrs. Hoshino ushered them warmly. “I think I prepared far too much dinner tonight. You three should help me finish it.”

Honami glanced at Yuu.
Yuu glanced at Honami.
Then the two turned to Ichika, who looked utterly lost in the strange momentum of the situation.

With no other choice, all three of them stepped inside.

The warmth of the Hoshino home wrapped around them the moment they stepped inside—soft lighting, the faint smell of miso soup, the low hum of a TV left on somewhere in the living room. Slippers were neatly lined up by the entrance, as if expecting guests.

“Come, come—sit down,” Ichika’s mother insisted, already moving toward the dining table with practiced energy. “You must be hungry. Hazuki-kun, Honami-chan, make yourselves comfortable.”

Honami flinched slightly at the attention, her fingers tightening on the strap of her school bag.

“Ah—yes… Thank you,” she murmured, dipping her head politely.

Yuu rubbed the back of his neck. “I appreciate it, Miss Hoshino…”

“Mom,” Ichika said quickly, stepping forward, “I’ll help them settle in—just let me talk to Hazuki-kun first, okay?”

Her mother nodded, already bustling toward the kitchen. “Alright, alright. Honami-chan, dear, why don’t you sit? You look tired.”

Honami hesitated. “I… um… I’m fine, really…”

“Sit, sit,” Mrs. Hoshino repeated, ushering her toward a chair with gentle insistence.

Honami reluctantly obeyed, folding her hands in her lap. Her expression softened a little under the warmth of the household—something achingly different from the cold weight she'd carried earlier.

But her eyes drifted toward Yuu as if checking that he was still there.

Before he could reassure her, Ichika suddenly grabbed his wrist.

“Hazuki-kun. With me.”

She pulled him down the hallway, not harshly but with the precision of someone whose patience had already worn thin.

“H-Hey—Ichika—!”

“Nope. You’re not escaping this conversation.”

She halted only when they reached her bedroom.

The door clicked shut behind them.

Ichika turned, arms folded.

“…Hazuki-kun,” she said quietly. “What happened?”

Her voice trembled slightly, barely visible under her usual calm.

“I know Honami. I’ve known her for years. And she doesn’t cry like that unless something… really bad happened.”

Yuu opened his mouth, then closed it.

Behind the door, in the dining room, Honami sat stiffly.

Ichika’s mother placed a cup of warm tea in front of her.

“Here, honey. Drink. It might help you relax a little.”

Honami blinked at the steam curling from the cup, her eyes reflecting its warmth.

“T-Thank you…"

Mrs. Hoshino smiled softly. “You’re always welcome here, Honami-chan. Ichika worries about you a lot, you know?”

Honami’s breath hitched.
Her fingers curled around the cup, as if grounding herself.

“I… see…”

She took a small sip.
The warmth spread through her chest—soft, quiet, comforting.

And for a moment…

She let herself breathe.

Meanwhile...

“Hazuki-kun,” Ichika whispered, taking a step closer, “please tell me the truth. I want to help her… but I can’t if you keep hiding things.”

Yuu looked at her—her worried eyes, her steady posture, her trembling sincerity.

“Sorry,” Yuu murmured, eyes dipping toward the wooden floorboards. “But… I think it’s better if you hear it from me.”

Ichika stopped breathing for a moment.

“…Why?” she asked, her voice soft—almost fragile.

Not accusatory, not angry… just painfully earnest.

It was the kind of tone someone used when they already feared the answer.

Yuu swallowed, forcing air into lungs that suddenly felt too tight.

“Because…”

Ichika leaned in, barely blinking.

“Because…?”

His mouth opened—

And then—

Grrrruuuuuuuu—

A stomach growl echoed through the small study room like a wounded creature.

Ichika’s entire face flushed a deep red in an instant.

"Are you perhaps..."

Ichika’s eyes widened in horror. “I-It’s because you two kept me waiting!!”

She puffed out her cheeks, turning away sharply, shoulders tight with embarrassment.

Yuu blinked, then carefully stifled a laugh.

“…Are you hungry?”

“Of course I am!” she snapped, but her voice cracked halfway through, betraying her mood. “I was waiting and worrying and— and— you didn’t even tell me anything yet!”

Behind the door, they could hear faint clattering—Ichika’s mother setting plates at the table, unaware of the storm brewing in the hallway.

Yuu sighed, gently.

"Sorry."

Ichika crossed her arms, still looking away.

“…Fine... but you’re sitting with me. And you’re not leaving until you tell me everything.”

Yuu nodded.

“That’s fair.”

Ichika stole a quick glance at him—checking, measuring… deciding whether he was telling the truth.

Then she tugged his sleeve with a small, frustrated huff.

“Come on. Mom’s going to think something weird is going on.”

Dinner was already set—steam rising in soft curls from miso soup, the golden sheen of grilled fish, small plates of pickles arranged neatly like tiny bursts of color. The warm light made the room feel smaller, gentler, almost like it was sheltering them from everything that had happened outside.

“Oh good, you’re all here,” Ichika’s mother said brightly as she wiped her hands on her apron. “Come sit, come sit! I might’ve made too much, but that just means you kids should eat plenty.”

“Mom…” Ichika muttered, cheeks already reddening.

Honami bowed her head politely. “Thank you for having me."

“Oh, Honami-chan, you’re always welcome here!” Ichika’s mother beamed, practically glowing as she ushered her to a seat. “You look thinner since the last time I saw you—are you eating properly? Ah, maybe you just grew taller!”

Honami nearly choked on her own breath.

“E-Eh?! I—I don’t think so—!”

Before she could recover, Ichika’s mother leaned in between the girls, eyes sparkling with mischievous curiosity.

“Sooo? You two walking home together again lately?”

Both girls froze like startled cats.

“H-HUH?!” Ichika squeaked, her voice jumping an octave.

“N-No! That’s not—We just—It’s not like that—!” Honami fumbled, her fingers trembling around her chopsticks.

Yuu calmly took a sip of water.

“Yes, they are, ma’am.”

“Well…” Yuu continued, ignoring the burning stares from both sides, “Ichika-san created a band with Saki-san. Since Mochizuki-san will be joining, it makes sense they’ve been walking home together, right?”

He turned to Honami with a gentle smile. “Isn’t that right?”

“…Y-Yeah…” Honami whispered, cheeks flushed pink.

Ichika finally blinked in surprise. “Is that… true, Honami…?”

Honami nodded, though her hands curled nervously in her lap.

“Yeah… But… please give me some time first, okay?”

“O-Okay! Saki will be so happy to hear you’re joining—she keeps talking about how much she misses you!”

Ichika’s mother clasped her hands. “Oh, that’s wonderful news. I haven’t seen Saki-chan in a while—is she well? I heard she got discharged recently.”

“Yeah,” Ichika said with a nod. “She’s doing a lot better.”

“I’m glad to hear that.” Ichika’s mother smiled, warmth flooding her expression. “Well then, I’ll leave you three to enjoy dinner. I still have a few things to take care of.”

She slipped off toward the hallway, humming cheerfully to herself.

And with her gone, the air changed—quiet settling over the table, the clinking of chopsticks suddenly too loud, and the weight of everything unsaid hanging just above their heads.

After that, the table grew quiet.

Not uncomfortable—just heavy. As if each of them was afraid that speaking too loud might make Honami’s fragile calm shatter again.

Chopsticks clicked softly against bowls, steam drifted between them in gentle curls, and the only real sound was the distant hum of the refrigerator.

No one pushed the topic.

No one needed to.

When dinner ended, Ichika led the way upstairs.

Ichika’s Room

Her room was small, tidy, and faintly scented of laundry detergent and warm sunlight—posters pinned neatly to the walls, a guitar leaning in the corner, and a soft blue blanket folded carefully on the bed.

Ichika sat at the edge of it, fingers laced tightly in her lap.
Honami and Yuu remained standing, as though the weight of what needed to be said wouldn't allow them to sit.

“Let’s… get back to the topic,” Ichika murmured, swallowing her nerves.
Her eyes drifted to Honami. “Honami?”

Honami’s gaze flickered toward Yuu—seeking permission, reassurance, something to hold on to.
He gave a small nod.

She breathed in.
Slowly, tremblingly.

“You see… Ichika…”

And so—piece by piece—Honami told her everything.

The accusations.

The whispers.

The fear.

The empty hallways and muffled laughter she wasn’t part of.

The loneliness that built and built until her heart couldn’t bear it anymore.

Ichika listened without a single interruption, hands tightening in the blanket beside her.

When Honami finally finished, Ichika whispered:

“…I knew it.” Her voice cracked. “I shouldn’t have just left you like that.”

Honami shook her head. “You offered to help. And that… that counts. Thank you.”

Ichika stood up so fast the bedsheets rustled, and without hesitating, she pulled Honami into a tight hug.

Her voice was close, warm against Honami’s shoulder.

“I understand you’re scared. You’re… gentle. You worry about upsetting everyone around you.”
She held her closer, arms firm, protective.

Honami’s breath hitched.
Tears welled again—soft, helpless.

“I wasn’t there for you when you needed me before,” Ichika continued softly, eyes closing as she held her friend. “So saying ‘I’ll help you now’… it must sound like an empty promise.”

Honami's fingers clutched the back of Ichika's shirt as she cried again—not loudly, but with the relief of someone finally allowed to stop pretending.

Yuu watched them from where he stood, hands tucked awkwardly into the pockets of his jacket. He smiled faintly—relieved, proud, a little emotional himself.

"I'm glad you two are finally making up," he said. "I should probably be going now—"

"Wait."

Ichika's head snapped toward him, her tone sharper than she intended.

"You still haven't explained anything," she said, one hand still resting on Honami's back.

"Like why you suddenly popped into the School SEKAI and ran off immediately."

"H-Huh? What do you mean?" Yuu stiffened.

"Hazuki-kun, please," Ichika sighed. "Tell me what's going on."

"I… uh…"

Just then—salvation.

A knock at the door.

"Ichika? Honami-chan? Hazuki-kun?" her mother called cheerfully. "I have apple pie here if you kids want some!"

"I-I'll get it," Yuu said quickly, already halfway to the door.

"Nope." Ichika pointed at him like she was declaring a crime scene. "Stay. Here. Hazuki-kun."

He froze.

"Honami," she added sweetly, "can you get the apple pie instead?"

"Y-Yeah…" Honami sniffled, wiping her eyes as she stepped out.

"Argh… fine… but…" Yuu exhaled, glancing briefly toward the door Honami had disappeared through. "Let's go somewhere else first."

Ichika narrowed her eyes. "…Somewhere?"

Yuu raised his wrist, tapping lightly on the smartwatch.
A soft chime rang out.

"Miku… are you there?"

For a moment, nothing happened.

Then the screen flickered.

Once.

Twice.

Before stabilizing just enough to show a distorted teal silhouette.

Hair glitched at the edges, her body half-transparent, like a corrupted rendering struggling to hold shape.

“M-Miku?!” Ichika leaned in, eyes wide. “W–What’s wrong with you, Miku?!”

The figure crackled with static.

“...Hhh—ello… Yuu…

“Hey, Miku,” Yuu said quietly, ignoring Ichika’s shock, “can you transport us to… my SEKAI?”

The glitching silhouette dimmed, then brightened, as if processing.

“…On it.”

Light surged from the smartwatch.

Ichika flinched, reaching instinctively for Yuu, but the floor dissolved beneath them before she could say anything.

The world folded inward, colors collapsing, sound vanishing into a deafening silence.

And then—

They landed.

A vast, pale space stretched endlessly around them—colorless, featureless, almost sterile. No sky. No ground. Just a boundless horizon of faint white haze, like they had stepped inside a half-finished dream.

Ichika’s breath caught.

“…Where… are we?”

Yuu lowered his arm, the smartwatch now dark and silent.

“This,” he said softly, “is my SEKAI.”

A faint distortion rippled through the empty space—like a flicker of static across an untouched canvas.

Then, piece by piece, a figure materialized before them.

Long teal hair.

A familiar silhouette.

But her form stuttered, breaking into pixel fragments every few seconds, as though the SEKAI itself struggled to render her.

She lifted her head.

“Nice to meet you, Ichika.”

Her voice echoed strangely—soft, yet layered with electronic noise.

“M-Miku…?”

The glitching girl smiled, though half her face momentarily pixelated before stabilizing again.

“I’m Hatsune Miku,” she said gently. “—the Hatsune Miku of Yuu’s SEKAI.”

Chapter 57

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

Ichika didn't move at first.

Her eyes swept across the empty, pale void—an endless horizon made of muted light and soft glitches, as though reality itself had forgotten how to finish rendering.

"This is…" she whispered.

"My Sekai," Yuu said quietly. His voice echoed faintly in the hollow space, the sound swallowed almost instantly.

Miku.

This Miku stood before her—no, wavered before her—her body stuttering in broken frames, each movement skipping like a corrupted video file. Blue hair flickered in and out of alignment, her outline dissolving into static before stitching itself back together.

"Ichika Hoshino," the Miku said, dipping her head in a motion that glimmered like shattered glass. "Welcome. Or… perhaps 'I'm sorry you had to see this' is more appropriate."

Ichika's breath caught.

She took a step back.

"What… What happened to you? And this place—this empty place—where even are we?"

Beside her, Yuu lowered his eyes.

His voice came out small, stripped of its usual guarded calm.

"This Sekai isn't part of the story," he murmured. "It's… mine. A space I wasn't supposed to have."

A silence thick enough to swallow sound stretched between them.

"This is your... sekai?"

Before Yuu could answer, Miku spoke—her voice splitting at the edges, as though several versions of her overlapped imperfectly.

"Yuu carries burdens from a world outside yours," she explained. "This Sekai should not exist. After all… Yuu does not even belong in this world in the first place."

The words struck Ichika like a cold wind.
She turned fully toward Yuu, eyes wide—not angry, not frightened, just deeply, painfully concerned.

“You brought me here,” she said, voice trembling, “because there’s something you’ve been hiding.”

Yuu nodded once.

“I can’t keep lying,” he whispered. “You deserve to know everything. Even if it scares you.”

Miku stepped back, as though retreating into the shadows between worlds. Her glitching form dimmed, giving them space—giving the truth room to breathe.

The void around them pulsed faintly, like a heartbeat in the dark.

“Tell me,” Ichika said. “No more running. No more half-truths.”

Yuu exhaled shakily, then turned to Miku.

“Miku… give her the memory. Ichika Hoshino’s memory. Everything she needs to understand.”

Miku nodded, her fractured outline brightening with static.

“Understood,” she said. “Preparing memory transfer.”

The white void deepened into a vast, starlit black.

The glitches rose—bright, dissonant, swirling around Ichika like falling shards of a broken timeline.

And then—

She saw.

She saw the first time they met—

Ichika’s breath hitched.

The moment Glitching Miku pressed her palm lightly to Ichika’s forehead, the world around her dimmed—colors draining, sounds thinning—until only fragments of memory flickered before her like shards of light floating in the void.

She saw the first time they met—

Not the simple greeting she remembered.

But the stillness that surrounded him.

A quiet, unnatural stillness that clung only to Yuu Hazuki.
Like time itself had paused—not for the world, but for him alone.

“…Are you Yuu Hazuki?” she had asked back then, unaware she was stepping into the gravity of someone who existed both inside and outside the story.

Then—

Another memory surged forward.

Their first true interaction in the School Sekai.

“So?” Ichika murmured in the vision, tugging him back from whatever distant corner of thought he’d drifted into. “What brings you here today, Hazuki?”

“I’m just… checking up on this Sekai,” he answered, tone soft, hands buried loosely in his pockets.

The Miku by the window had chimed in gently, “I heard you visited the Street Sekai with the other Miku. How was it?”

And then—

A third memory unfolded like a page being turned.

That day at the mall.

The faint mall lights reflected in Yuu’s eyes as he glanced toward the shops ahead.
“Something like that,” he’d said. “If you don’t mind tagging along.”

Ichika remembered her own voice—sharp with nerves, softer with warmth.

“Of course not. Since I’m already here…”

“Good,” Yuu replied, adjusting the strap of his sling bag with quiet confidence.
“Come on. Let’s make this easy before the stores get crowded.”

The memories overlapped, blurred, then sharpened—past and present tangling together until Ichika felt her knees weaken beneath her.

Her world had always been linear.

Yuu’s… was not.

“Done,” Glitching Miku whispered, pulling her hand back.

The null Sekai reformed around her, its empty whiteness stretching out endlessly.

“Ichika-san? How are yo—”

Yuu stepped forward, concern threading his voice.

And without thinking.

without hesitation.

without even fully understanding what had just been restored inside her.

Ichika moved.

She closed the distance between them and wrapped her arms around Yuu, holding him tight.

Yuu stiffened, stunned. “H-Huh?”

Ichika's fingers curled into the fabric of his shirt, trembling with the force of everything she couldn't put into words fast enough.

"I'm sorry…" Her voice broke against his shoulder. "I'm really… really sorry. How could I forget something like that…? How could I forget you?"

Each apology spilled out as it hurt her to hold them in.

Yuu blinked, startled—not by the hug, not by her tears, but by the raw sincerity pouring from someone who had always tried to stay composed.

"…It's not your fault," he said quietly.

His hand hovered uncertainly before settling on her back, gentle, careful, as though she might shatter again if he made one wrong move.
In this colorless void, his voice echoed with a rare softness.

"Ichika, the world you live in forces you to forget things… You didn't choose that."
A faint breath.
"And you didn't forget because you wanted to."

Ichika shook her head, tears sliding silently down her face.

"But… you were alone, weren't you?" she whispered. "All that time you were watching over us… helping us… and I—" Her breath trembled. "I didn't remember any of it. I didn't remember you trying."

Her grip tightened.

"I can't believe I left you to carry that alone."

Yuu swallowed hard.

"Hey…" he said softly, trying to coax her gaze up. "…But you're here now, right? And you remember. That's enough."

Ichika finally looked up, eyes wet, lashes trembling.

"But I don't want to forget again."

Yuu's expression faltered, just a little, because he wanted that too.

Because he knew the story wouldn't allow it forever.

But he still answered with a steady smile.

"Then… let's make sure you don't."

Yuu's smile deepened.

Ichika wiped the last of her tears with her sleeve.

"Welcome back, Ichika-san."

Ichika inhaled shakily, steadying herself.

Her fingers loosened from his shirt, but she didn't step away

"Mmmh," she breathed, a small nod following. "…I'm back."

For a moment, nothing else moved.

Just Yuu and Ichika.

"I'm back," Ichika repeated, softer, as if confirming it to herself.

Silence settled over the glitching horizon—soft, fragile, and strangely warm.
Ichika held her breath for a long moment before finally speaking, her voice quieter, steadier than before.

"…Hazuki-kun," she began, lifting her gaze to him, "I think… I understand now."

Yuu blinked, surprised by the certainty in her tone.

"I feel like I know what you're going through, You're trying to return to your original world… and in this one—this Sekai of yours—nothing exists yet. Not fully."

Her fingers curled slightly at her sides, hesitation flickering across her expression before she nodded, as if sealing her own words.

"Right?"

[Well... My original plan from the start was to return to my world]

"…Correct," he said at last. "But I'm on the verge of getting Leo/need back together."

"Then that means…" She took a step closer. "We need Shiho. Right?"

"Correct." Yuu nodded. "Shiho is essential. As for Mochizuki-san..." He let out a quiet breath. "—She'll do fine. I'm sure of it."

Ichika's eyes softened, the glitch-light reflecting in them like starlight on water.

"Then…" she murmured, "we'll bring everyone back. One step at a time."

After that, Ichika decided to help Yuu... as they returned back to her bedroom.

The glitchlight softened around them, thinning into gentle streaks of blue and white—until the floor beneath their feet steadied, the weight of reality returning all at once.

Ichika's bedroom came back into focus.

Yuu exhaled as the last trace of his Sekai dissolved from the air. Ichika stepped forward first, steadying herself on the edge of her desk before turning to him with renewed resolve.

"I'll help you," she said quietly. "From here on… I want to understand everything." Before Yuu could respond, the doorknob turned.

Perfectly timed, as if the world itself followed a script, Honami peeked inside.

“Sorry for the wait, I brought the apple pi—”

She froze.

Ichika.

Hazuki-kun.

Together.

Standing a little too close, breathing the same breath.

“Ah—Honami!” Ichika straightened, cheeks warming. “You’re back!”

Honami blinked twice, her expression caught between confusion and concern. “…Did something happen?”

Yuu opened his mouth. Ichika opened hers at the exact same moment. And both fell silent, glancing at each other.

Honami stepped fully inside, clutching the small plate of apple pie between her hands like a peace offering. Her gaze flicked between their faces, Ichika’s lingering tension, Yuu’s unreadable calm, the faint buzz of something unspoken still clinging to the air.

“Um…” she tried again, softer this time. “Did I… interrupt something?”

The room held its breath.

Yuu let out his first.

“…No,” he said gently. “You didn’t interrupt anything.”

But Ichika's eyes lingered on him—knowing that "anything" didn’t mean "nothing."

And Honami felt it too.

Something had shifted while she was gone. Something big.

She swallowed, redirecting her gaze between them.

Then, very softly—

“…Tell me, you two… are dating, right?”

The room went still.

Ichika’s reaction was immediate.

“EH—?! N-N-NO!! NO, WE’RE—IT’S NOT—!!”
Her voice cracked, hands flailing so fast the bedsheets rustled behind her.
She turned red from the ears down, like someone had set her embarrassment on fire.

“H-Honami! W-Why would you even—?! That’s not—that’s not—!”

Meanwhile, Yuu blinked.

Once.

Twice.

Then he exhaled, steady but unmistakably stiff at the shoulders.

“…We’re not,” he said, voice even but carrying a faint, betrayed tremor, like he’d just been hit with a question he wasn’t prepared for. He raised a hand to his cheek, feeling the warmth there. “…I mean—we’re not dating. No.”

Ichika whipped toward him. “Hazuki-kun!! Don’t say it like that!"

“Like what?” he asked, genuinely confused.

“Like—like you’re answering a job interview!!”

“…Is that not how you’re supposed to answer…?” Yuu muttered, looking away for the first time.

A tiny, almost invisible flush colored his ears.

Honami stared.

Then—slowly, carefully—she tilted her head.

“…So you aren’t dating?” she asked again, watching both their reactions like she was solving a puzzle.

“We’re not!!” Ichika squeaked, hugging her pillow to her chest like a shield.

Yuu nodded.
“We’re not,” he repeated, calm on the surface… but his fingers fidgeted once at his side, betraying the faintest ripple of nerves.

Honami looked between them.

Ichika, redder than a strawberry.

Yuu, collected but quietly rattled.

The air between them, warm enough to bend light.

She blinked.

“…Mm.” She brought a hand to her chin. “…You really look like you’re dating, though.”

“WE’RE NOT—!!” Ichika squealed again, burying her entire face in her hands this time.

Yuu coughed politely and looked away, as if trying to pretend the heat on his face didn’t exist.

Yuu cleared his throat as a lifeline had just drifted past him.

"…Wait." He glanced toward the window. "…What time is it?"

Ichika blinked, still pink in the face as she fumbled for her phone. "H-hold on…" She checked the screen, then sighed. "…Around 9 PM."

"Already…?" Honami murmured, her expression softening. She looked at the untouched apple pie on the desk—small plates, forks, the faint sweet scent filling the room. "Then… maybe we should wrap this up after we finish eating."

"Yeah," Ichika agreed quietly, settling beside her. "It's late."

Yuu nodded once, gently exhaling. "I'll walk you home then," he said—calm, steady, like it was simply the obvious thing to do.

Honami looked up at him in surprise.

Her lashes trembled briefly before she offered a small, earnest smile.

"…Thank you."

The warmth in her voice wasn't loud.

The three of them sat together around the small plate of apple pie, the quiet of the night settling gently around them.

After they finished the last bites of apple pie and cleaned up the small mess on Ichika's desk, the three stepped out into the cool night air.

Ichika lingered there with them, hands clasped in front of her, her breath visible in the night.

She looked at Yuu first.

"Make sure to take care of Honami."

Yuu met her gaze with a small nod—calm, reliable, the kind of expression that always made people feel strangely at ease around him. "Mmh. Don't worry."

Ichika relaxed just slightly, shoulders easing. She turned to Honami next.

"Thank you again… Ichika," Honami said, dipping her head politely, her voice gentle.

Ichika's expression softened. "See you at school… Honami." She offered a tiny wave—shy, but sincere.

Honami waved back.

Then Ichika's eyes flicked to Yuu for a brief second—just long enough for a faint pink to rise on her cheeks again—before she stepped back.

"Goodnight, you two."

Honami and Yuu both bowed lightly.

“Goodnight.”

As Ichika turned and headed back toward the dorms, Honami tugged lightly on Yuu’s sleeve.

“…Let’s go home?”

The night was quiet.

Peaceful.

And somehow, walking side-by-side felt less awkward than it should have.

As they passed beneath the soft glow of a streetlamp, Honami slowed her pace. Yuu matched it instinctively, his step falling into rhythm with hers. When she tugged gently at his sleeve again, he turned, the light catching faintly in his dark eyes.

“Hey… Hazuki-kun.”

Her voice was quieter than before—careful, almost shy.

Like she’d said his name a hundred times in her mind and only now dared to let it slip into the world.

Yuu blinked once. “Yes…? Mochizuki-san?”

Calm, polite… yet curious.

He was listening.

Honami looked ahead for a moment, hands brushing each other nervously as she walked. The night wind stirred her hair, carrying the faint scent of the school garden’s fallen leaves.

“Thank you…” she murmured. “I feel like something finally came off my shoulders. And now I feel… light. Really light.”

Yuu’s expression softened—then a sudden grin broke through, brightening his face in a way few people ever got to see.

“Yeah…! I’ll be expecting you to join the band, okay?!”

“E-Eh?!” Honami nearly tripped. “Again…? Please give me time!”

“Pfft—time?” he chuckled. “There’s no need for that. I’m sure Saki-chan would be thrilled!”

Honami’s eyes widened. “Is that so…?”

“Of course. She’s been dying to have you in the band!"

“…Hazuki-kun,” she muttered, cheeks warming, “you’re not helping.”

He only laughed, and Honami found herself laughing with him—quiet, but real.

They walked on, trading small comments and light teasing about how Saki might react—whether she’d squeal, jump, or immediately hug Honami to death—until Honami suddenly slowed again,

her eyes lifting to the sky.

“…Huh?” She pointed. “Is that…?”

Yuu followed her gaze.

A streak of silver cut across the night.

“A shooting star?” he breathed.

“That’s unusual,” Honami whispered, mesmerized.

“Really?” Yuu asked, watching the sky with a soft curiosity.

She nodded faintly. “I don’t usually see them from here.”

The shooting star faded, leaving behind only the quiet glow of the streetlamps and the gentle sound of their footsteps.

But for a moment, it felt like the night had paused, just to let them share it.

The last trace of light vanished into the night sky, leaving only the quiet street and the two of them walking side by side.

Honami lowered her hand slowly, a small, thoughtful smile forming.

“…Let’s go,” she said softly.

“Yeah,” Yuu replied.

Chapter End Notes

> I'm starting to feel like they won't show these kinds of emotions, especially Ichika... Am I straying from the path? Normally, I'd be writing these kinds of scenarios based on their facts and emotions in-game and wiki...
>
> By the way, I'd probably write a Christmas extra chapter... probably.

Chapter 58: One Day Under the Star

Miyamasuzaka Girls' Academy — Class 1-C

"Ichiii! The weather's so perfect today, huh!"

Saki's voice burst across the classroom like morning sunlight, bright and impossible to ignore. She leaned over Ichika's desk, cheeks glowing, hair bouncing with every excited sway.

Ichika blinked up from her notebook, smiling softly.
"You're in a really good mood. Did something happen?"

"Heh heh heh! Not yet." Saki puffed her chest proudly. "But I'm going shopping after school. Want to come with?"

Before Ichika could answer, the lunch bell chimed, and the two of them headed out—Saki practically dragging her by the wrist.

Musical Instrument Shop

right displays reflected off the polished floors. Rows of guitars, keyboards, amps, and stands stretched before them in neat, shining lines.

"Ah," Ichika murmured with a small laugh as Saki's eyes sparkled, "so this is what you're after."

"Yup!" Saki declared, hands on her hips. "Since we've got a band now, I want a keyboard I picked myself! I'm prepared to spend all the pocket money I've saved!"

Ichika admired her friend's determination.
"You're really serious about this. But remember—expensive doesn't always mean best. Maybe we should ask someone from the staff?"

"Hm… true." Saki scanned the store. "Do you see anyone around—"

Her voice caught. "Oh! It's Shiho!"

Ichika froze. "…Shiho."

And with that name came a sudden pulse—
Yuu's voice echoing in her memory, glitchlight flickering around the edges of her mind.

("Remember, Ichika-san. We're back at the very start. Act the way you did when your band first formed…") Back then… the loneliness clinging to her.

That ache she never voiced.

She swallowed it down.

Shiho paused mid-step, a small bag of guitar strings in hand. "…Saki? Ichika?"

"Shiho, hi!" Saki beamed. "Haven't seen you since that time in SEKAI! Shopping today?"

“Yeah.” Shiho shifted her weight, lifting her bag slightly. “You?”

“Heh! I’m here to buy a synthesizer!”

Shiho raised a brow. “Why?”

“Because we started a band! Miku and her friend from SEKAI are helping us practice!”

“…You’re kidding.” Shiho exhaled sharply. “You’re doing band practice with Miku? You can just hang out in that weird world and it doesn’t bother you?”

“It’s not weird! It’s wonderful!” Saki insisted. “Anyway—you’re still playing bass, right? Are you in a band?”

“I see where this is going,” Shiho muttered. “I’m not joining your band.”

“Oh, don’t be like that! I didn’t even ask yet!”

Shiho rubbed her forehead. “…I’m not in a band. But I fill in at the live house where I work if the bassist can’t make it. I’m fine on my own.”

Ichika stepped forward before she realized.
“Shiho…”

Saki took a deeper breath, her expression softening. “But I want to spend more time with you. A lot more. I want you in our band. And Honami too. The four of us—let’s play together.”

Shiho’s eyes lowered.
“…You haven’t changed at all since elementary school.”

“Really? How so?” Saki blinked innocently.

“Back then, you begged me every day to play with you. Even though I told you I wanted to stay home and play games.”

“Ehh? I wasn’t that bad…”

“You were.” Shiho sighed. “And you still are. Just like my sister. I always end up giving in.”

Saki laughed nervously. “Sorry… I just really liked playing with you!”

Shiho hesitated—then her voice lowered.

“I joined a band once. In junior high. The pop music club invited me. But the members treated it like a social group. They couldn’t play a single song properly. We argued… and in the end… they kicked me out.”

The air stilled.

“Shiho…” Saki whispered.

“I’m not joining a band that isn’t serious.”

Ichika stepped forward, heart steady.
“Shiho… we are serious. We want to start a band—and make it work.”

Saki glanced at her, surprised.
Shiho studied Ichika in silence.

For a moment, Ichika felt Yuu’s words again.

Act like the beginning… lonely, uncertain… but honest.

Shiho let out a long breath and reached into her bag.

“Can you learn to play this song by next week?”

Saki blinked at the sheet music. “What’s this… oh—sheet music?”

“If you can play this with me,” Shiho said firmly, “I’ll consider joining your band.”

Saki’s eyes sparkled like fireworks.
“!! I’ll do it! I’ll practice every day! Right, Ichi?!”

“I—yeah!” Ichika nodded quickly.

“Good. I need to head to work.” Shiho walked past them, footsteps fading.

Saki squeezed the sheet music like a treasure map. “Woohoo!! Ichi, we’re gonna learn this perfectly! We can do it!”

Ichika exhaled, smiling softly. “Yeah… Saki, thank you. Without you, I might’ve… given up on Shiho.”

“Hehe! That’s why you need someone stubborn like me!” Saki winked. “We can’t waste this chance. Let’s start practicing. But first—new keyboard!”

Ichika stepped toward the counter with her. “Excuse me, could you help us with something?”

With that... The two took the first step to bring Shiho back to them.

Meanwhile…
Kamiyama Street — Shiho’s Perspective

The evening air along Kamiyama Street carried a faint chill, brushing against Shiho’s cheeks as she walked. The neon lights of nearby storefronts flickered across her eyes, painting brief colors over the quiet frustration circling her thoughts.

[They want me to play with them…] Shiho exhaled through her nose. [I thought it’d be better if I kept my distance.]

Her footsteps echoed against the pavement—steady, deliberate, almost too loud in the stillness.

Just then, a thin streak of light cut across the sky.

Shiho stopped.

“Huh…?” Her eyes widened slightly. “Was that… a shooting star?”

The moment it passed, something tugged loose inside her chest—soft, faint, familiar.

A memory.

[Flashback]

A younger Saki, no taller than Shiho’s shoulder, bounced excitedly beside her.
“What was that?! A shooting star? Oh no, I missed it! Where did it go?!”

“Saki-chan, calm down,” Shiho muttered, embarrassed but secretly amused.

“I am calm!” Saki insisted, eyes still darting skyward. “Where is it? I’m trying but I can’t see any!”

Little Ichika leaned forward beside them, pointing upward.
“You have to be patient. If we keep looking together, we’ll see one eventually.”

Shiho… remembered watching their silhouettes glow beneath the street lamp—the warmth, the noise,
the tiny world they made together.

[End Flashback]

Shiho blinked, the memory dissolving as she lifted her gaze once more.

The sky above Kamiyama wasn’t dark enough for stars—
just a flat canvas washed in city glow.

She exhaled, slow and almost resigned.

“…Oh.” Her lips pressed into a thin line. “It was just a plane.”

A hollow little laugh slipped out before she could stop it.

“I guess… there’s no way you’d see a shooting star from here.”

Shiho slowed her pace.

On a quiet bench tucked beneath the halo of a streetlamp, someone sat alone—head bowed slightly, fork lazily tapping against a paper plate.

Apple pie.

The boy lifted his head.

His eyes widened just a fraction when he saw her.

Shiho stopped a few steps away, blinking once.

"Ah... Hello?"

He blinked back at her—equally surprised, but far calmer.

“It’s you…” she muttered under her breath.

“Yeah,” Yuu replied, offering a small, almost sheepish nod. “It’s me.”

He glanced down at his half-finished apple pie, then back at her with a disarming calm.

“…Do you want some?”

Shiho froze.

Her shoulders stiffened, her breath catching just slightly.

“…I—I’m good,” she muttered, turning her gaze away.

But she didn’t move.

“So… how about sitting down for a bit?” he asked, patting the empty space beside him.

“I’m good,” she insisted again—too quickly, too stiffly.

Yuu let out a tiny breath.

“Cold,” he murmured. “Well… you’re not visiting the School SEKAI.”

His eyes softened, the way they always did when he already knew the answer before asking. “Can you tell me why?” he asked gently.

Shiho’s voice finally broke the silence—low, guarded, laced with that familiar wall she always kept between herself and the world.

“…Why do you want to know?”

Not quite hostile.

Yuu didn’t flinch.

He set his fork down beside the apple pie with deliberate gentleness, straightening in that unnervingly calm, grounded way of his. The kind of calm that didn’t push, didn’t demand—just waited.

“Because…” he began, his voice quiet but sure, “the others missed you.”

Shiho’s eyes flickered.

“I think you already know, that Saki-san and Ichika-san started a band.”

Shiho exhaled—a slow, unsteady breath that sounded more like resignation than surprise.

“So I heard…” She crossed her arms, gaze fixed on some distant point across the street. “But again… I’m not joining unless they’re serious.”

“I’m glad,” Yuu said.

She snapped her eyes toward him.

“…You’re glad?”

He nodded once, as if the answer were obvious.

“Yeah. I am.”

Shiho stared at him—baffled, irritated, and somehow… thrown off balance.

A beat passed.

Another.

Then frustration cracked through her composure, sharp and quiet but undeniably real.

“Who are you, anyway?” she muttered, not quite meeting his eyes. “Why do you keep butting into our business? This is our problem. You… you have nothing to do with it. Nothing here.”

Yuu didn’t recoil.

He didn’t even look hurt.

Instead, he looked at her with a softness she couldn’t understand—like he had expected her anger and accepted it before it even came.

“Maybe that’s true... but I can’t overlook something once I’ve seen it. And the School SEKAI…” His eyes met hers—steady, unwavering. “That place was part of your feelings too.”

Yuu’s voice broke the small silence between them.

“Say… can you play that bass for me?”

Shiho froze mid-step.

“…What?” She turned her head slightly, one eyebrow twitching upward. “Why would I do that?”

“It’d make me happy,” Yuu said plainly. “And… I want to hear how you play. Just once.”

Shiho’s fingers tightened around the strap of her bag.

She looked away.

“…I’m not some street performer you can just ask to play for fun,” she muttered. “If you want music, go listen to someone else.”

Her tone was blunt—cold, even.

But the faint pink dusting her ears betrayed her.

Yuu didn’t retreat.

“I’m not asking for fun,” he replied softly. “I want to understand you better.”

Shiho’s jaw tightened.

“Hazuki-kun,” she said, exasperated, “you don’t understand anything. Music isn’t something I play just to show off. I play because I take it seriously.”

“I know.”

She blinked, caught off guard by the immediate answer.

“I saw how you played in the School SEKAI, Even the version of you there… took it seriously.”

Shiho’s breath hitched.

She hated how easily he said things that slipped beneath her guard—quiet truths she didn’t know how to handle.

“…You’re really annoying,” she muttered under her breath.

Yuu smiled faintly. “I get that a lot.”

Shiho let out a slow sigh.

She could’ve walked away. She should have walked away.

But instead, after a long moment, she spoke, quiet, irritated, reluctant:

“…I don’t have my bass with me.”

Yuu’s smile deepened just a fraction. “Then I’ll wait until you do.”

Shiho looked away—shoulders tense, footsteps slower now.

“…Fine,” she murmured. “Maybe. If I feel like it.”

For Shiho Hinomori, that was practically a promise.

And Yuu knew it.

[What the hell… Suddenly asking me to play bass… Do I look like a street performer to him…?]

Shiho exhaled sharply through her nose, eyes narrowing at Yuu. He wasn’t joking—his expression was too sincere for that. Too earnest, too straightforward.

And then—

“The School SEKAI… that place was part of your feelings too.”

Ichika’s voice resurfaced in her mind, unwelcome, irritatingly accurate.

[What an idiot…]

Not him—her, for even letting the words get to her.

She crossed her arms, looking away.

After a long, tense pause, she finally muttered, voice low and reluctant:

“…I don’t have my bass with me.”

She clicked her tongue quietly.

“…If I did, maybe.”

Meanwhile... From Ichika and Saki's perspective.

The doors of the classroom burst open in a flurry of energy as Saki and Ichika hurried inside, instruments clutched firmly in their hands. Their footsteps echoed through the quiet, amber-tinted room, still stuck in its eternal twilight.

“Miku! Luka! Sorry for barging in!” Saki practically sang the words, bouncing as she set her keyboard case onto a desk. “We have to master this song so Shiho will join our band!”

Ichika bowed apologetically, her expression earnest. “I’m sorry if we’re asking too much… but this is our chance. Please, will you help us practice?”

Miku let out a soft, playful giggle. “So your friend is considering joining after all? Of course. You can count on us!”

A few gentle notes rang out—Luka testing the tuning as the atmosphere shifted into a quieter, more purposeful tone.

Practice...

“That phrasing was really good.” Miku nodded, swaying slightly with the melody. “Let’s try it again.”

“Okay. From the top!” Ichika answered, gripping her guitar.

Nearby, Saki frowned thoughtfully at her sheet music. “Luka, I’m not sure what kind of vibe this melody is supposed to have… What do you think?”

Luka tapped a finger to her chin. “Hmm… maybe try playing it like this.”

She demonstrated—her fingers gliding across the keys, giving the piece a subtle emotional color Ichika hadn’t been able to articulate.

“Ooh…!” Saki lit up. “Okay! Let me try!”

Music spilled through the classroom, raw, clumsy in places, but growing fuller, steadier, more alive.

Hours passed without either girl noticing. The lull of dusk never changed; the sky never darkened nor brightened.

Ichika blinked, finally checking the time. “Oh—when did it get so late?”

“Eh? Really?” Saki gasped. “I was so into it, I didn’t even notice!”

“It’s always sunset here…” Ichika murmured, looking toward the window. “It makes it feel like time is standing still.”

Miku walked over, smiling gently. “The scenery is shaped by your feelings. That’s why it stays at that lonely, quiet hour.”

Ichika stilled. “…Huh?

Saki twirled on her heel, suddenly brimming with excitement again. “This song is really tough, huh? You can tell Shiho picked it.”

“Perhaps…” Luka said with a soft smirk. "But don’t you think she chose it because she hopes you’ll take this seriously?”

Ichika’s eyes softened. “Shiho…”

But Saki only grinned in her usual bright way. “Yeah! That’s exactly why we have to master it! Oh, oh—Ichika! I came up with a tune while practicing! Wanna hear it?”

“An original? Sure.”

Saki’s fingers danced across the keys.

A soft melody blossomed, simple but warm, full of earnest emotion.

“That’s… really nice.” Ichika said, surprised.

“Really?! Yay!” Saki giggled. “You used to write lyrics, remember? Ever since then, I’d sometimes think up little melodies!”

“Ah… yeah. That was a phase.” Ichika laughed awkwardly. “But I’ll listen to anything you make. Always.”

Saki’s gaze drifted to the windows. “Hey… Ichika. Look at this.”

Ichika followed her pointing finger.

A star map was chalked across the classroom wall—delicate constellations, neatly sketched.

“A star map?”

“Yep! And there’s another on the blackboard—like we were getting ready for a stargazing trip.” Saki’s eyes sparkled. “I’d love to go stargazing someday…”

Miku stepped forward. “You can, if you head to the rooftop.”

“But it’s still early evening…” Saki blinked.

“SEKAI is created from your hearts. Try it.”

So the four of them—Saki, Ichika, Miku, Luka- walked down the hallway into a world shaped by fragile emotions and old memories.

When the rooftop door opened—

The sky above was no longer dusk.

It was night.

A vast, endless night sky hung above them, glittering with thousands of stars.

“Waaah…!” Saki gasped. “I’ve never seen the sky like this…!”

Ichika’s breath caught.

[I remember this… This exact sky. When Saki and I practiced for Shiho… back then, too…]

Saki stepped closer to the railing. “But how?! It was sunset just before this!”

“As I said,” Luka reminded her gently, “This world reflects what lies in your hearts.”

Ichika looked up, her eyes warm with nostalgia.

“Saki… do you remember when the four of us went stargazing together?”

“Yeah! We climbed the jungle gym and waited for shooting stars!” She snapped her fingers.
“Which constellation was it again? Cancer?”

Ichika shook her head. “Leo. We were watching the Leonids.”

Saki brightened in remembrance. "Ah—right! Hona tried so hard to teach us…”

Ichika leaned her elbows lightly against the railing, the cool night breeze brushing her cheeks. The sky above shimmered like a velvet tapestry—stars scattered in endless constellations.

“Yeah… she’s always been interested in them.” Ichika’s voice was soft, remembering Honami’s patient explanations beneath similar skies.

Saki laughed, rubbing the back of her neck.
“But Shiho said none of Honami’s lectures stuck with her. Not that I remember much either…”

Ichika covered her mouth to hide a smile. “I do. Honami repeated the names over and over. She actually got upset with Shiho for not remembering any.”

“Oh yeah!” Saki’s eyes widened. “Shiho and I weren’t prepared for Honami’s angry mode—so we panicked and actually paid attention for once! I can’t believe that was so long ago.”

Ichika’s gaze drifted to the stars—glowing softly like memories resurfacing. “Well… in a few days, we’re meeting Shiho.”

“And we have to play that song perfectly!” Saki pumped a fist into the air. “If we do, she’ll join us!”

Ichika nodded, feeling warmth swell in her chest. “Maybe one day, we’ll all stargaze together again.”

“I hope so…” Saki whispered.

Ichika closed her eyes, letting the moment settle into her bones.

(With Saki beside me… I know we can all be together again. Just like before.)

(I remember everything now. And this time—I'll make sure it turns out differently.)

She looked toward Saki, determination clear in her steady eyes.

"We can do this, Saki."

Saki smiled back, bright, unwavering. "Yeah!"

A Few Days Later — Scramble Crossing

The city roared around them—car horns, scattered conversations, the rhythmic pulse of Shibuya beneath neon lights. People crossed the intersection in every direction, weaving like threads in a vast tapestry.

Saki practically bounced in place when Shiho approached, bass case slung over her shoulder.

"Shiho, we're ready!" Her voice carried above the noise, full of excitement.

Shiho paused, arms crossed, her expression the usual mixture of sternness and guarded skepticism.

"I don't think this needs explaining," she said coolly. "But if you mess up even once—just one mistake—you can forget about me joining."

Ichika squared her shoulders. "We're aware."

"Good. Then let's head to the studio." Shiho turned on her heel—then stopped.

Her eyes narrowed slightly.

"…By the way." She pointed her chin toward a figure lingering at the edge of the crossing. "Why is Hazuki-kun here?"

Yuu lifted a hand in a casual little wave, a grin tugging at his lips.

"Well, I wanted to hear it. Don't mind me!"

Saki lit up instantly. "Ooh! Then Yuu-kun can be the judge!"

"E-Eh? Saki—?!" Ichika nearly tripped over her own words.

Shiho stared at Yuu long enough for him to feel a chill crawl up his spine.

But she didn't refuse.

She simply sighed.

"Fine. But keep quiet."

Yuu nodded. "I'll behave. Promise."

And so the four of them—Ichika, Saki, Shiho, and the ever-present outlier Yuu—stepped off the crossing together, weaving through the crowd toward the studio.

A first test.

The studio door slid shut behind them with a soft click—sealing the four of them inside, away from the noise.

Saki tightened her grip on the keyboard she'd chosen with such care.

Ichika steadied her breathing, fingers brushing lightly over her guitar strings.

This was it.

The first note would decide everything.

Saki glanced at Ichika.

Ichika nodded.

And together, they lifted their instruments.

Shiho's expression didn't change.

But her gaze softened.

Barely.

Yuu leaned forward, breaths held.

The song was about to begin.

Chapter 59: Leo/need

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

The studio lights hummed softly overhead, casting pale reflections against soundproofed walls that had witnessed countless dreams—some fulfilled, others abandoned halfway through a song.

Shiho adjusted the strap of her bass with practiced ease. Her expression was composed, unreadable, but the tension in her shoulders betrayed her focus. This wasn't casual. It never was with her.

Let's get started," she said.

Her voice was firm. Final.

Ichika nodded, fingers settling around her guitar neck. Thecool metal strings steadied her breathing, grounding her in the present. "Ready when you are."

Saki bounced once on her heels, excitement barely contained as her hands hovered above the keyboard. "Okay, girls! Let's jam!"

And then—

The first note rang out.

Shiho's bass cut through the silence, deep and precise, laying a foundation that demanded attention. It wasn't loud—but it was unwavering, every note placed with intent. Serious. Just like she'd warned them.

Ichika followed, her guitar weaving in carefully at first, then with growing confidence.

The melody trembled—just a little—before finding its footing, like a breath held too long finally released.

Saki came in last.

Bright.

Clear.

Earnest.

Her chords spilled into the room, filling the empty spaces the others had left behind, lifting the song upward—toward something hopeful.

Shiho's fingers moved steadily along the strings, each note sharp and deliberate.
They weren't lagging behind.

(They're keeping up with me…)

Her eyes flicked briefly toward them, unreadable.

(They must've practiced this song a lot.)

Ichika felt the rhythm settle into her bones.

The countless hours in the School SEKAI, repeating phrases, correcting timing, listening to Miku and Luka's gentle guidance—clicked together at last.
(All right. We can do this. We've got this down to a T.)

Beside her, Saki played with fierce concentration, shoulders squared, eyes fixed on the keys.

(I haven't missed a single note…)

Her lips curled into a small, determined smile. (Just keep it up. Just a little longer—and Shiho will join us.)

Then—

The world tilted.

(Uh…?)

The notes on the keyboard blurred, swimming just out of focus. Heat crawled up her neck, her heartbeat suddenly too loud, too fast.

(Why am I… getting dizzy? No—no, not now…)

Her hands trembled, fingers barely grazing the keys.

(We're so close. I have to finish the song—)

The sound cut off abruptly.

Thud.

"Saki?!" Shiho's voice cracked through the room.

Ichika's breath hitched.

(Oh no… I remember this.)

She was already moving, dropping her guitar and rushing forward as Saki crumpled to the floor. Ichika crouched beside her, heart pounding as she reached out.

"Saki—are you okay?!"

Saki blinked up at her, unfocused at first—then she laughed softly, a weak, apologetic sound. "Hehe… sorry I didn't say anything," she murmured. "I think I worked up a fever…"

Shiho was already pulling out her phone. "I'll call an ambulance."

"No—" Saki lifted a hand weakly. "I'm fine. Really. It's just a cold." She managed a small smile. "Can I… lie down for a bit?"

Ichika helped her sit, gently steadying her shoulders. "How are you feeling now? Is it any better?"

“Yeah,” Saki said quietly. “Thanks. I just… needed a break.”

Guilt twisted tight in Ichika’s chest. She lowered her gaze, fingers curling into the fabric of her skirt. “Even though we practiced together every day… I didn’t notice you were sick.” Her voice wavered. “I’m sorry.”

Shiho looked away, jaw clenched, her reflection faintly visible in the studio glass. “…It’s my fault,” she said flatly. “I pushed you too hard.”

“No… it’s nobody’s fault but mine.”

Saki’s voice was soft, but firm—steady in a way that left no room for argument. She smiled faintly from where she lay, eyes half-lidded.

“I didn’t realize my limits,” she admitted. “I was just… having so much fun today. I didn’t want it to end, even when I knew I should’ve stopped.”

A quiet voice cut in from the side.

“Don’t push yourself.”

Yuu stood a short distance away, arms folded loosely, his expression calm but serious.

Ichika nodded, kneeling closer to Saki. Her smile was gentle, tinged with relief.
“Saki… I know exactly what you mean.” She glanced toward the instruments, still resting where they’d fallen. “I’m just happy we got to play together today.”

The room settled again.

Shiho stood apart, hands buried deep in her pockets, gaze lowered.
“….”

Ichika looked up at her, hesitating only a moment before speaking.

“I thought you hated me, Shiho.” The confession slipped out quietly. “I didn’t think we’d ever get to hang out like this again.”

Shiho’s shoulders stiffened.

“…No,” she said after a beat. “I never hated you.”

Saki shifted slightly, propping herself up on her elbows, watching Shiho with open curiosity.
“Then tell me, Shiho,” she said softly. “What happened while I was in the hospital?”

Shiho’s fingers curled tighter in her pockets.

“…I ended up in a class where I didn’t know anyone,” she began, voice flat, unembellished. “Some girls tried talking to me. Asked me to walk home together. Eat lunch.”

She paused.

“But you know I’m not the social type. I don’t feel the need to be around people all the time.” Her eyes flicked away. “So I kept refusing.”

The silence stretched.

"…After that, they stopped asking," Shiho continued. "And eventually, they started avoiding me."

She shrugged, as if it didn't matter—but the tightness in her jaw betrayed her.

"I didn't mind at first," she added. "But that's how it started."

Ichika said nothing.

She simply listened—hands clenched lightly in her lap, heart tightening with every breath she took.

Shiho exhaled, slow and controlled.

"…I didn't mind it at first," she continued. "Being left alone. I was actually relieved."

Her voice remained even, but something brittle hid beneath it.

"But then…"

The memory surfaced uninvited.

"This girl from another class keeps coming around to see Hinomori all the time," someone whispered. "What was her name again? Hoshino?"

"Seriously? Hinomori actually has a friend?" another scoffed. "They've been together since elementary school, right? Birds of a feather."

"Yeah, that makes sense. She seemed rude too. Kind of standoffish."

"I hate people like that. Acting like they're too cool for everyone else. Like they're special or something."

Shiho's nails dug into her palms.

"…I snapped," she admitted quietly. "I yelled at them for talking behind my friends' backs."

Her lips pressed into a thin line.

"That just made things worse."

Ichika's breath caught.

Shiho looked away.

"I don't care what people say about me," she said flatly. "Never have. But I didn't want them spreading rumors about you… or Honami."

Saki blinked, realization dawning.
"So you decided to cut ties with everyone?"

"…Yeah."

The word fell heavy between them.

Ichika stood abruptly, emotion flashing across her face.
“Why didn’t you say anything!?”

Shiho flinched—just slightly.

“Because you would’ve worried,” she replied. “You would’ve come looking for me at school. And those girls would’ve only gotten nastier.”

Saki stared at her, then smiled—soft, warm, unmistakably Saki.
“Well… thanks for telling us now.” She tilted her head. “It’s good to know you didn’t suddenly change and start hating us.”

Her smile widened just a little.
“You did all that because you cared about Ichi and Hona, didn’t you?”

Shiho said nothing.

Her silence wasn’t rejection—it was the quiet of someone who didn’t know how to accept being seen so clearly.

Ichika stepped closer.

“Shiho,” she said, voice trembling but firm, “no matter what anyone says… I want to be your friend.”

Shiho let out a short, humorless breath.

“…Meh.” She looked away again. “I messed it all up anyway.”

Ichika froze.

“Huh?”

The word slipped out before she could stop it—confused, startled, and aching with the sense that Shiho had been carrying this weight alone for far too long.

Yuu, who had remained quietly by the wall until now, finally spoke.

“…You didn’t mess it up.”

All eyes turned to him.

Shiho frowned slightly. “You don’t get to decide that.”

He met her gaze without flinching.

“No,” he said evenly. “But I can say this—protecting people you care about isn’t a mistake. Even if it hurts. Even if it’s lonely.”

Shiho’s grip tightened around the strap of her bass case.

Yuu continued, voice steady, almost gentle.

“You chose to carry everything yourself so no one else would get hurt. That doesn’t make you cold. It just means you were afraid of dragging them down.”

The room fell silent.

“…That’s exactly why, they’re still here.”

Ichika looked at Shiho then, really looked at her—and nodded.

“And we’re not going anywhere,” she said softly.

Shiho let out a short, breathy scoff, running a hand through her hair as she looked away.

“So much for self-control,” she muttered. Her voice was flat, but there was a trace of resignation beneath it. “I warned you. If you’re going to keep this up, don’t come crying to me later saying you can’t hack it.”

Ichika and Saki froze.

“—?!”
“Shiho… does that mean—?”

Shiho exhaled once more, then finally faced them.

“I’ll join your band,” she said simply. “If that’s okay with you.”

For a heartbeat, the room was utterly still.

Then—

“Fufu~ I knew it,” Yuu said with a grin, the tension breaking at last.

“Sh-shut up!” Shiho snapped immediately, her ears turning faintly red.

Ichika and Saki didn’t hesitate.

They rushed forward and wrapped their arms around her at the same time.

“We couldn’t be happier!” Ichika said, her voice trembling with relief. “Welcome to the band, Shiho!”

“…Okay,” Shiho replied, stiff at first—then, just barely, she relaxed.

“Woohoo!” Saki cheered, pumping her fist before immediately wobbling. “Ichi, we did it! Shiho’s really joining us!”

“Yeah,” Ichika laughed softly. “We really did.”

Saki’s eyes sparkled. “And maybe—if we have a proper talk with Hona, she’ll join too!”

Yuu cleared his throat gently, cutting in before she could spring back to her feet.
“Ah… about that. Saki—rest.”

Shiho shot her a sharp look. “Exactly. Don’t jump around when you’re sick. Lie back down.”

She sighed, crossing her arms. “First things first—you get back in shape. Then we’ll figure out how to talk to Honami. Together. Got it?”

Saki grinned, already settling back against the cushions. “All right! Hehe.”

Now that we’ve done it… only Honami’s left.
Yuu exhaled quietly, the thought lingering longer than it should have. Maybe… I shouldn’t rush things. And yet… I want to.

A brief silence settled over the room.

“Say,” Yuu spoke up at last, lifting his gaze. “Can you all come to the School SEKAI tomorrow?”

“Huh?” Shiho frowned slightly. “Why?”

“I think… I know a way to reach Hon—” he paused, correcting himself, “—Mochizuki-san.”

“Really?!” Saki’s eyes lit up, her earlier fatigue forgotten for a moment.

Yuu nodded once. “But I can’t do it alone.”

His eyes shifted to Ichika.

She met his gaze without hesitation and gave a small, firm nod. “Then… if you say that, we’ll do it.”

And just like that—

The Next Day

Miyamasuzaka Girls’ Academy — Class 1-B

The classroom buzzed with idle chatter, sunlight filtering through the windows in warm bands.

“So, what’re you guys doing over the school break?” one girl asked, stretching lazily over her desk.

“I’m going on a trip with my family!” another replied brightly.

“Nice… I got a temp job. Kinda regretting it already.”

“I’ll bring you something back!” she laughed. “We should go shopping when I’m back!”

“Definitely! What about you, Honami?”

Honami hesitated, fingers tightening around the edge of her desk.

“…I thought,” she said softly, “it might be nice to go stargazing.”

A beat.

“In the city?” one of them blinked. “You can’t really see stars here.”

Honami flinched. “S-sorry. That was weird, wasn’t it? I don’t know why I said that…”

Another classmate tilted her head. “Hey… are you okay lately?”

“Huh?”

“You’ve been kind of gloomy,” she said gently. “What’s eating you?”

“It’s nothing!” Honami replied too quickly. “Sorry for worrying you.”

“Uh-oh,” the other teased lightly. “Is it something you can’t tell your friends?”

Honami fell silent.

“…You sure you’re okay?” someone pressed.

Before she could answer—

The classroom door slid open.

“Honami!” a voice called. “Someone’s looking for you! A Kamiyama High student!”

“Huh…?”

Confused murmurs rippled through the room.

And then—

“Yo, Honami.”

She turned.

Yuu Hazuki stood in the doorway, hands in his pockets, wearing that familiar, unbothered smile.

“Eh?!” Honami startled, standing so abruptly her chair scraped the floor. “H-Hazuki-kun?! What are you doing at Miyamasuzaka? Do you need to go to Ichika’s class—?”

“I’m here for you,” he said simply.

The classroom exploded into whispers—some gasps, some excited squeals.

Honami’s heart pounded as she glanced back at her classmates. "But..."

“I’ve got club today,” one of them said casually. “Don’t worry about me.”

“And I’ve got work,” another added.

“I…” Honami swallowed. “…I guess I’m free then.”

Yuu stepped forward and held out his hand.

“Great,” he said softly. “Shall we?”

For a moment, Honami stared at his hand—then, gathering what courage she had left, she reached out.

And took it.

“Thanks,” Yuu said quietly. “I need to talk to you about something. It’s… really important.”

Before Honami could respond, his hand closed gently around hers, and he started walking.

“H-Hazuki-kun—!” she stammered, flustered. “P-people will start rumors… they’ll definitely misunderstand…”

“Ah—sorry,” he replied, slowing just a little but not letting go. “But this really can’t wait.”

They climbed the stairs in silence until the school rooftop opened before them, bathed in pale afternoon light. The wind brushed past, carrying the distant sounds of the city below.

Yuu glanced around, sharp and careful, making sure no one else was there.

“What did you want to talk about?” Honami asked, her voice tentative.

“First,” he said, turning to her, “there’s something I need to show you.”

“…What is it?”

“You’ll need to come to Miku’s world for this.”

“…What do you mean—oh.”

Understanding dawned almost immediately. Honami pulled out her phone, fingers trembling slightly as she opened the familiar song.

The song titled ‘Untitled’ glowed softly on the screen.

She pressed play.

The world shifted.

Light folded in on itself, and when her senses steadied, they were standing once more inside the classroom of the School SEKAI—unchanged, yet filled with a quiet warmth.

“…It’s that place,” Honami murmured. “The one we were suddenly taken to before…”

“This is your—no,” Yuu corrected gently. “Everyone’s SEKAI.” He turned and gestured forward. “Come on. I want to show you something.”

“…Has Ichika, Saki, and Shiho been coming here?”

“Yeah,” he nodded. “They practice here. It’s their studio, in a way.”

“Oh…” Honami’s voice softened. “So… this is where you all meet…”

“Honami,” Ichika’s voice called. “This way. We’re going to the rooftop.”

“Eh—? W-What for…?”

She followed them up the stairs, and the moment they stepped outside—

“Oh…”

Honami froze.

Above them stretched a vast, glittering night sky—endless, luminous, alive with stars. The kind of sky she had only ever imagined.

“So many stars…” she whispered. “I don’t think I’ve ever seen the night sky like this.”

“It was the first time for us, too,” Ichika said softly.

Honami turned.

Ichika stood there with her guitar resting against her shoulder. Beside her, Shiho held her bass with quiet confidence, and Saki beamed, hands on her synthesizer like it was treasure.

“Do you remember,” Ichika asked, “when we went to the park to watch that meteor shower?”

“…Yeah.”

“We used to play there all the time,” Ichika continued. “But at night, it felt like a different place. Even walking there felt like an adventure.” She smiled faintly. “Maybe that’s why the stars felt brighter. More beautiful.”

Honami swallowed.

“We talked about it the other day,” Saki chimed in, laughing. “And I mixed up the Leonids with the Cancrids. Hehe!”

“How could you?” Honami protested, a small smile breaking through. “I told you so many times what that meteor shower was called…”

“At one point,” Ichika added, amused, “she started making up her own constellation names. Panda. Pigtails. Stuff like that.”

“Hehe… yeah,” Honami laughed softly. “And then Shiho joined in—‘Doesn’t that one look like a bass guitar?’”

“I-it does!” Shiho said defensively.

Ichika looked at Honami then—really looked at her.

“Honami…” she said gently. “I really want all four of us to be in this band.”

“I wish we could all laugh together again.”

Ichika’s words lingered in the air, soft but aching.

“Ichika…” Honami whispered. “But—”

The warmth of the moment shattered.

Voices clawed their way back into her mind, sharp and cruel.

- Honami's such a bootlicker.
- Yeah. She thinks that's how she'll get everyone to like her.
- She acts like an angel, but we can all see through her fake kindness.

"I… I…" Honami's breath trembled, her chest tightening as the memories resurfaced.

Then—another voice, steadier, gentler.

"You don't have to keep pretending anymore."
"You can just… be honest."

Yuu's words echoed clearly, grounding her.

"Cry if you have to. Scream. Fall apart. But don't disappear."
"Because someone out there still wants to see you smile—genuinely."

Honami lifted her head.

The stars still shone above them.

"Ichika…" she said shakily. "I'm… pathetic. I was so scared of being disliked. I thought if I tried harder—if I smiled more—I could avoid being hurt." Her voice cracked. "But all I did was hurt the people who cared about me the most."

"Honami…" Ichika stepped closer.

"After everything," Honami asked, barely able to meet her eyes, "do you really still want me back?"

"We already talked about this," a voice reminded gently.

Ichika nodded. "And that hasn't changed. It's what we want more than anything."

"…Hona."

Saki's voice wavered.

"Honami," Shiho said quietly.

Honami's shoulders shook as she bowed her head.

"Saki… Shiho… please forgive me. When my classmates started ignoring me, I was terrified. I didn't know how to tell you what was happening." Her hands clenched at her skirt. "I was so afraid it would happen again in high school that I tried to please the few people who were kind to me. I pretended you weren't my friends—even though it hurt you."

"Honami," Ichika said softly.

"It's all because I'm spineless—"

"You're not," Saki interrupted, tears spilling freely. "I should apologize too. I wasn't there when you needed help the most."

“I shouldn’t have left you alone either,” Ichika admitted. “I noticed something was wrong… and I did nothing.”

Honami looked up, eyes shining. “How can you still care about me after I pushed everyone away?”

Shiho answered without hesitation.

“It’s simple.”
She met Honami’s gaze.
“You’re our friend.”

“…Shiho.” Honami smiled through her tears. “Thank you.”

Saki laughed weakly, wiping her eyes. “H-Haha… your eyes are all red, you know.”

“You should look in a mirror,” Ichika teased gently.

“I wasn’t crying,” Shiho muttered.

Ichika turned serious again. “Honami. Join our band. We won’t leave you alone anymore. We’ll always be together.”

Honami inhaled deeply—then nodded.

“…Yes. Thank you, everyone.”

“Hehehe!” Saki cheered. “At last, we’re a band of four!”

“Our band isn’t a joke,” Shiho said firmly. “You’ll need to take practice seriously.”

“Yikes!” Saki laughed. “Shiho’s already laying down the rules!”

“I’m just saying—if we’re doing this, we do it right.”

“Hehe,” Honami smiled.

“What is it?” Ichika asked.

“I’m just…” Honami looked up at the stars again. “I’m so happy to be in a band with you. I think this is what I wanted from the very beginning.”

“Honami…”

Footsteps approached.

Miku and Luka stepped onto the rooftop, smiling warmly.

“You’ve finally discovered your true feelings,” Miku said.

“Congratulations,” Luka added.

“Huh?” Ichika blinked. “My phone just flashed.”

“Mine too!” Saki said. “Why are we back in the classroom?”

“Your feelings are about to become a song,” Luka explained. “And Honami—you’re a part of it too.”

“I see…” Honami bowed slightly. “Thank you, Luka. Thank you, Miku. For showing us that beautiful starry sky.”

“You know what comes next, right?” Miku asked.

“Yeah!” Saki grinned. “We’re going to play together!”

“Which song?” Shiho asked.

“Whoa—!” Saki stared at her phone. “It’s just Untitled flashing!”

“It’s the same on mine,” Ichika said.

“Your feelings have become music,” Miku smiled. “May I sing with you?”

“We’d love that,” Ichika replied. “It’s your song too. We couldn’t have found it without you and Luka.”

“Hehe,” Luka laughed softly. “Then I suppose I’ll join as well.”

Meanwhile—

While the girls were lost in their own world, laughter and music weaving between them, Yuu quietly stepped back.

Hands tucked into his pockets, he slipped away from the rooftop and down the empty corridor, his footsteps echoing softly until he reached a vacant classroom.

A translucent interface flickered to life before his eyes.

[School SEKAI has been updated.]

“…Good,” Yuu murmured. “That’s one out of five SEKAI.”

“At this pace,” a distorted voice chimed in, “we might actually manage to save everyone.”

Glitching Miku appeared on the surface of his smartwatch, her form wavering like a broken signal.

“Yeah…” Yuu replied.

She tilted her head, concern bleeding through the static. “But are you alright, Yuu? You look pale.”

“It’s nothing,” he said, a little too quickly. “I’m just… tired.”

“Please don’t push yourself,” Miku said gently. “Take it easy, okay?”

“Thank you, Miku,” Yuu smiled faintly. “But if I stop now… we won’t know what might happen to the others.”

“…Are you going to say goodbye to them?”

Yuu shook his head. “We’ll meet again. I’m sure of it.”

A small smile tugged at his lips. “Though they’ll probably scold me for disappearing again. Especially Ichika.”

Just then, music drifted through the air.

Miku glanced toward the sound. “See? They’re playing NeedLe.”

As the first notes rang out, Yuu faded from the School SEKAI—his presence dissolving like mist under starlight.

He reappeared atop the rooftop for a brief moment, then summoned his Project SEKAI UI. With a single tap, he selected the Crossing Scramble icon.

The world shifted.

Neon lights, bustling noise—yet no one noticed him.

“Now then…” Yuu muttered as he stepped forward. “What’s next?”

He had only taken a few steps into the crossing when he froze.

A familiar figure passed him by.

Yuu turned sharply, eyes widening as the person disappeared into the crowd.

No way…

His breath caught.

Isn’t that… Kotaki Nagi…?

The crowd swallowed her whole.

Neon lights flickered.

Footsteps crossed.

Voices overlapped.

But Yuu stood still.

Kotaki Nagi—someone who shouldn’t be here, someone who wasn’t supposed to exist in this flow of the main story.

The crossing light changed.

People surged forward again, carrying the world along with them.

Yuu exhaled slowly, fingers curling at his side.

“…So that’s how it is.”

Whatever awaited him next, he could already feel it—

The story wasn’t done pulling him forward.

And this time, it had found him first.

Chapter End Notes

Crap... It feels rushed now... This is supposed to end in Chapter 60.

Chapter 60: Courage

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

They say challenges can become stepping stones to growth, But only if you survive the fall that comes before it.

Yuu Hazuki had learned that lesson the hard way.

The scramble crossing roared around him, a living tide of bodies and noise.

Neon signs bled into one another, their reflections smearing across rain-darkened asphalt as footsteps overlapped, voices collided, and the city refused to slow for anyone.

And in the middle of it—

The name struck him like a shock to the chest.

Before he could think, his feet were already moving.

A shoulder slammed into his side.

Another clipped his arm. The crossing signal shifted, and the crowd surged harder, its momentum twisting him off course, pulling him away from the figure he'd seen only seconds ago.

By the time he fought his way free, breath uneven, the space where she had stood was empty.

Gone.

Only the hum of the city and the sound of his own heartbeat remained.

Then—

A voice cut through the noise.

…This scene.

The crowd ahead had formed a loose circle, people slowing, stopping, drawn toward something at its center. A girl stood there, microphone in hand, singing with a sincerity that pierced straight through the city's clamor.

An Shiraishi.

Nearby, another voice whispered in awe.

"Oh wow… she's amazing. Singing out here like that… I could never do that."

Yuu's breath caught.

This wasn't just familiar.

His gaze shifted instinctively—past An, past the crowd—

To the girl standing beside her.

Smiling.

Watching.

The song ended to scattered cheers. An bowed deeply, wiping sweat from her brow as the crowd slowly dispersed.

Switching to An Shiraishi's perspective.

“Good grief, An. You did well.”

An grinned, hands on her hips. “Yeah! I’d say that was a performance well done! I even got everyone to join in!”

“It was solid,” Nagi replied casually. “You’ve got presence.”

“But I’ve still got a long way to go,” An said, her expression sharpening with resolve. “I need more practice. And more importantly—bandmates. I can’t do this alone forever.”

A soft chuckle escaped Nagi. “Fufu~ You’re really serious about this, huh?”

“Of course!” An shot back without hesitation. “I have to surpass you—RAD WEEKEND!”

Nagi laughed outright. “Naive. You’ve still got a long way to go.”

She turned, already walking off. “Now clean up and let’s go. I’m thirsty.”

An watched her go, fists clenched—not in frustration, but determination.

An slung her jacket over her shoulder, eyes still shining from the adrenaline of the performance.

“Well,” she said with a grin, stretching her arms, “I’ll just have to keep searching! After all, I’m going to hold an event that’ll surpass the legendary RAD WEEKEND!”

Nagi didn’t even slow her steps. “Surpass it if you can~”

“Come on, Nagi,” An protested, jogging to catch up. “At least give me some confidence here!”

Nagi glanced back over her shoulder, a teasing smile tugging at her lips. “I am though.”

An scoffed, but her grin never faded.

The two turned the corner together, heading toward WEEKEND GARAGE—voices fading into the noise of the street.

—

Meanwhile — Yuu Hazuki

Yuu stood frozen where he was, watching their backs disappear.

His feet began moving again, aimless, automatic, carrying him through the crowd without direction.

His thoughts tangled tighter with every step.

He stopped abruptly.

“U-Um… are you okay?”

The voice pulled him back to reality.

“God damn it!” Yuu snapped aloud. “What’s going on anymore?!”

“Eek!”

Someone stumbled backward in front of him—losing balance, falling onto the pavement with a startled gasp.

Yuu froze.

“Oh—!” He stepped forward immediately, guilt crashing through him. “I’m sorry—I didn’t see you there.”

He extended a hand toward her.

“N-No, it’s okay,” the girl said quickly, pushing herself up slightly. “You just looked really lost in thought… a-and you almost ran into someone.”

“…Yeah,” Yuu murmured. “That’s on me. I’m really sorry.”

She hesitated, then took his hand.

As he pulled her up, he finally got a proper look at her.

Glasses.

Soft features.

“Hm…?”

Recognition struck him all at once.

“My name’s Hazuki Yuu,” he said slowly. “And you are…?”

“K-Kohane Azusawa.”

Yuu’s eyes widened.

“Azusawa-san…” He let out a quiet breath, half-laughing. “I knew it. You looked familiar—I saw you at the scramble crossing earlier.”

“R-Really?!” Kohane blinked, surprised, fingers tightening around the strap of her bag.

Yuu nodded.

“You look awed too,” Yuu said, tilting his head slightly.

Kohane flinched, fingers tightening around the strap of her bag. “Well…” She hesitated, eyes lowering. “It’s nothing.”

“Hm?” Yuu studied her for a moment, then let it go with a small nod. “If you say so.”

An awkward silence settled between them—thin, fragile, like it might shatter if either of them spoke again.

Yuu cleared his throat quietly.

“I should get going,” he said. “It was nice meeting you, Azusawa-san.”

“Y-Yeah!” Kohane replied quickly, bowing a little out of habit. “Nice meeting you too!”

Yuu turned and began to walk away, disappearing back into the flow of the crowd.

Kohane watched his back until she couldn’t tell him apart from anyone else anymore.

Kohane blinked, her steps slowing.

“Why do I feel like…” she murmured softly, almost afraid of her own words, “…I’ve met that person before?”

The noise of the scramble crossing rushed around her, laughter, footsteps, distant music—but her thoughts felt oddly distant, as if they were sinking somewhere deeper.

She pressed a hand lightly against her chest.

It wasn’t familiarity in the usual sense. Not recognition of a face or a name.

It was more like a feeling—warm, faint, and lingering, like a song she couldn’t quite remember the melody of.

Kohane shook her head, forcing a small laugh. “I must be imagining things…”

The next day—

Miyamasuzaka Girls’ Academy, Class 1-A

Sunlight filtered through the classroom windows, dust motes drifting lazily in the air as chalk tapped against the blackboard.

“Let’s see,” the teacher said, adjusting his glasses as he glanced down the attendance sheet. “Ms. Azusawa, would you solve this problem for us?”

Kohane’s shoulders stiffened.

“O–okay…” She stood slowly, fingers tightening around the hem of her skirt. Her eyes traced the equation on the board, numbers blurring together. “Um… I…”

A few seconds stretched too long.

“Not sure, huh?” the teacher said, already turning away.

Kohane swallowed. “No, you, uh… square the three and—”

“How about you, Ms. Sato?” he interrupted, pointing elsewhere.

“Oh…”

The sound of chalk resumed, sharp and final.

Before Kohane could retreat fully into her seat, the school bell rang, slicing through the air and releasing the class in a wave of noise.

“That was rude,” Minori said as they packed their bags. “They could’ve given you a little more time! You knew the answer, didn’t you?”

Kohane nodded faintly. “Y–yeah… but it’s okay. It’s my fault for not speaking up…”

(Even though I’m in high school now,) she thought, (I haven’t changed a bit.)

“Oh! Look at the time!” Minori glanced at her phone, eyes lighting up. “I’ve got to get to dance practice! See you tomorrow, Kohane!”

“Yeah. See you tomorrow, Minori.”

Kohane watched her go, Minori’s steps light and purposeful.

(She’s amazing.) Kohane thought. (Working so hard for her dream…)

Her hand drifted to her chest again, unconsciously.

I still can’t remember it clearly, she mused, but that dream I had the other day… it felt like something was about to change.

The memory of the scramble crossing flickered in her mind—noise, music, and a boy with tired eyes who felt strangely familiar.

If I found a dream… or a goal… could I change too?

Her phone buzzed.

“Oh— Mom’s texting me.”

She glanced at the message.

Could you buy that CD for me on your way home?

Kohane smiled softly. She must mean that new album she mentioned.

Okay, will do.

Sliding her phone back into her bag, Kohane stepped out of the classroom

Music Shop

(It’s been a while since I’ve been in a CD shop…)

Kohane lingered just inside the entrance, the soft chime of the door fading behind her. Shelves lined with colorful album covers stretched out in every direction, and overhead speakers filled the space with music.

Oh… they’re playing that new Miku single.

Her steps slowed as she listened. The melody was sharp yet gentle, confident but warm—like it was pulling her forward without asking permission.

It sounds so cool… she thought. I wonder who wrote it.

She shook her head lightly and refocused, moving down the aisles, eyes scanning the racks.

—

A few minutes later, she frowned.

“Hm… it should be around here somewhere…”

Clutching the note on her phone, she approached the counter. “E–excuse me, do you have this CD?”

The shop clerk glanced at the title, then gave an apologetic smile. “Oh, I’m very sorry, but we’re currently sold out of that album. However, our alley shop still has a few copies left.”

Kohane stiffened.

(The alley shop…? Isn’t that the one in that scary-looking back alley…?)

“If you’d like,” the clerk continued, “I can call ahead and have them reserve a copy for you.”

Kohane hesitated, fingers curling around her bag strap.

(I really don’t want to go down that street… But Mom was really looking forward to this.)

She took a small breath, then nodded.

“Th–thank you,” she said, forcing a polite smile. “I’ll… I’ll head over there now.”

As she turned toward the exit, the music behind her swelled slightly.

Kohane froze mid-step.

(What should I do…? I really don’t want to go there…)

Her gaze lingered on the shop’s glass door, beyond it the fading daylight—and somewhere further away, that narrow, shadowed alley the clerk had mentioned.

“Huh? Azusawa-san?”

At the sound of her name, she flinched.

She turned around slowly.

Standing a few steps behind her was a familiar figure, hands tucked into his pockets, expression caught somewhere between surprise and relief.

"…Hazuki-kun?"

Her eyes widened. Of all places, she hadn't expected to see him here.

Yuu blinked once, then gave a small, lopsided smile. "So it was you. I thought I recognized you."

Kohane nodded quickly, then looked down, fingers fidgeting with the strap of her bag. "U-Um… hello. It's, uh… nice to see you again."

For a moment, neither of them spoke. The music from the speakers filled the silence, soft and distant.

"…You look troubled," Yuu said at last, tilting his head slightly. "Something wrong?"

Kohane hesitated.

She almost said nothing.

Almost brushed it off like she always did.

But then she remembered that strange feeling from yesterday—the sense that meeting him hadn't been an accident.

"…I need to go to the alley shop," she admitted quietly. "But I'm… not very good with places like that."

Yuu followed her gaze to the door, then back to her.

"…I see."

He straightened, then shrugged lightly. "Then how about this? I'm heading that way anyway."

Kohane looked up, startled. "R-Really?"

"Yeah," he said, as if it were the most natural thing in the world. "We can walk together."

Her heart skipped, just a little.

"…Th-Thank you," she said softly.

With that, the two of them headed toward their destination together.

"Come again!" the shop clerk called as they stepped back outside.

Kohane let out a breath she hadn't realized she'd been holding, clutching the CD to her chest. "Phew… I'm glad I found a copy…"

"Good for you, Azusawa-san," Yuu said, a faint smile crossing his face.

“M-mm… thank you, Hazuki-kun.”

She glanced around uneasily. The alley felt different now—still unsettling, but no longer suffocating.

“This area really does have a spooky feel to it,” Kohane murmured. “Why are all the walls covered in graffiti?”

Yuu stopped for a moment, his gaze tracing the layered paint, the overlapping voices frozen in color.

“Graffiti’s meant for self-expression,” he said quietly. “A sense of freedom. Thrill-seeking. Sometimes it’s just an artistic outlet—to be seen, to leave proof you were here.”

“I-I see…”

Kohane followed his eyes. The fear she’d felt earlier wavered, replaced by something unfamiliar.

(Self-expression, huh…)

“Anyway, Hazuki-kun… where are you going?” Kohane asked, clutching the CD a little tighter. “You said you’re heading to the same street, right?”

“Yeah,” Yuu replied, glancing down at his phone. “The map says it should be around here…”

The screen dimmed.

Low Battery.

“…And my phone died,” he muttered flatly. “Guess I’ll just have to ask for directions.”

“E-Eh? Hazuki-kun?”

Kohane hesitated.

(Hazuki-kun… I wish I could help you, but—)

She checked her own phone.

The screen was black.

(My phone also died…)

Before she could say anything, Yuu had already stepped forward, toward a figure leaning against the alley wall. Kohane hurried after him, her footsteps light but anxious.

“Excuse me,” Yuu said. “Do you know where WEEKEND GARAGE is?”

“WEEKEND GARAGE…?”

The stranger scratched his chin, eyes narrowing as if digging through memory. “Hmm…”

The stranger shook his head.

“Sorry. Can’t say I’ve heard of it.”

“I see… thank you,” Yuu replied, already turning away.

He walked back down the alley, hands slipping into his pockets. Kohane followed a step behind, her gaze fixed on his back.

(Maybe… maybe this is my chance to help him.)

“U-Um! Hazuki-kun…!”

He stopped and looked over his shoulder. “Hazuki here, yes?”

“You said… WEEKEND GARAGE, right?”

“Yeah.”

Kohane took a breath, her fingers curling into the hem of her sleeve.

“Th-Then… h-how about we split up and look for it…?”

Her voice wavered, but she forced the words out.

(That’s right. If we do this… I can help Hazuki-kun.)

Yuu studied her for a moment, surprised. “…Are you sure?”

She nodded, small but firm. “Y-Yeah…”

For the first time, Kohane felt it—that faint, trembling sense that she had taken a step forward on her own.

“All right,” Yuu said after a short pause. “But if you’re not sure, come back to this street, okay? … Wait. What about your phone?”

Kohane lifted her phone weakly. The screen dimmed, the battery icon blinking red in silent warning.

“Ah… what luck we have,” Yuu muttered. He let out a dry laugh, shook his head, then lightly slapped his cheeks as if to reset himself. “All right. Just ask around for directions, okay?”

“O-Okay…”

(For Hazuki-kun!)

They split up, footsteps fading in opposite directions.

The alley grew quieter.

Neon signs flickered on one by one as the sky deepened into dusk, long shadows stretching across the graffiti-stained walls. Kohane stood frozen at the corner of the street, her hands clenched tight around her phone.

A group of strangers passed by, laughing. Another person brushed past her shoulder without noticing.

Her chest tightened.

(I can't…)

She took a step forward, lips parting—then stopped. Her throat felt locked, as if the words were stuck somewhere deep inside her chest.

(I just have to ask for directions…! But… I told Hazuki-kun I'd help him…)

Her vision blurred, tears threatening to spill as the streetlights flickered on.

(It's getting dark…)

Kohane lowered her head.

(Why am I always like this?)

Her reflection stared back at her from a darkened shop window—small, uncertain, shrinking into herself.

(I can't even gather the courage to ask someone for directions… I can't deal with something this simple…

"Hey… you look cute. Wanna hang out?"

The words dropped into the air without warning—too close, too casual.

Kohane's body stiffened.

A stranger stood before her with an easy grin stretched across his face. His hands were buried in his pockets, posture relaxed, as if this alley were his own living room. The faint smell of cigarette smoke and something cloyingly sweet clung to him, and his shadow stretched long and crooked across the concrete, brushing against her feet.

"U-Uhm…"

Her voice barely escaped her throat.

Her fingers tightened around her phone until her knuckles ached, the rapid pounding of her heart drowning out the distant hum of traffic. Each beat echoed in her ears, loud and unsteady.

(No…)

She took a hesitant step back.

"I-I'm sorry, I—"

"C'mon," he cut in lightly, waving a hand as if brushing away her discomfort. "Relax a little. I'm not asking for much. Just thought we could talk."

Another step.

Her back met the cold brick wall.

(What do I do…?)

She tried to speak again, but her throat locked, fear creeping up her spine in a familiar, suffocating way.

(Don't upset them. Don't make things awkward. Don't cause trouble.)

"I… I really need to go," she managed at last, the words trembling as they finally slipped free.

The stranger blinked, then let out a short laugh.

"Huh? You're pretty shy, aren't you?"

He stepped closer.

Kohane's breath caught.

(Hazuki-kun…)

Then—

"Kohane-san, you're here…! Sorry, I didn't mean to be late!"

The voice cut cleanly through the tension.

Kohane's eyes widened as she turned, relief crashing over her like a wave.

"Are you okay…? I'm sorry for leaving you alone."

Yuu's voice was low, earnest, carrying a weight of guilt as he stepped closer.

Kohane shook her head quickly, clutching the CD to her chest as if it were an anchor.

"N-No, it's not your fault," she said, her voice still unsteady. "I just… I froze. I didn't know what to do."

Her gaze dropped to the pavement, where the painted colors of graffiti bled into one another like blurred emotions. For a moment, she pressed her lips together, then forced herself to continue.

"But… I'm glad you came back."

Yuu exhaled softly, relief crossing his face.

"…I wouldn't have left, Not like that."

A faint melody drifted through the night.

???
——♪ ——♪

Kohane paused mid-step.

“…Hm? Is that… music?”

Yuu tilted his head, listening.

For a brief second, something like recognition flickered across his face.

“…You’re right,” he murmured. “We’re close. Really close.”

The sound grew clearer with every step.

——♪ ——♪

“It’s coming from over there,” Kohane said softly.

They turned the corner.

“Weekend Garage…?” Kohane read the sign aloud, then glanced at Yuu in surprise. “Hazuki-kun —”

“Yeah,” he replied, a small smile tugging at his lips. “This is the place.”

The lights inside spilled warmly onto the street, music pulsing through the open door.

“It says they’re open, I wonder what kind of place it is…”

“You’ll find out.”

Before she could react, Yuu took her hand and gently pulled her inside.

—jingle—

The café bell rang.

“Oh?” someone said inside. “Looks like they’re about to start.”

(Start…?)

Kohane’s eyes were drawn instinctively toward the stage.

♪——!

Her breath caught.

♪!!!

Sound crashed over her—sharp, loud, electrifying. Her ears rang, her heart jumped, and yet—

(What… is this…?)

The music thundered through her chest, vibrating down to her fingertips. It was overwhelming. It was dazzling.

“…Amazing,” Kohane whispered without realizing she’d spoken. “They’re… really cool.”

Beside her, Yuu smiled quietly.

When the song ended, cheers filled the garage.

“Man, that was great! Thanks, everyone!” An’s voice rang out, bright and confident.

“You’re starting to make us look bad,” one of the musicians laughed. “You’ve been practicing again, haven’t you?”

“Thanks, but I’ve still got a long way to go,” An replied, grinning. “I wanna get even better. One day, I’m gonna put on a show that surpasses RAD WEEKEND!”

“Better than that?” the DJ scoffed playfully. “Dreamin’ big again, huh?”

Kohane watched her, eyes wide.

(She has a dream… That’s why she looks like that when she sings.)

“I bet you’re proud,” another voice said. “Having a daughter who wants to follow in your footsteps, Ken.”

“Sure am,” An’s father replied calmly. “Funny thing is, though—I didn’t teach her a thing.”

“I couldn’t just sit around after seeing a show like yours, Dad,” An shot back. “Just you wait! I swear I’ll surpass you someday!”

“Sure~ If you can, go for it,” Nagi added with an easy laugh.

“I’m looking forward to it,” Ken said. Then he nodded toward them. “But before that—how about you take their order?”

An turned—and froze for half a second.

“Oh! A customer!”

Kohane flinched slightly. “Ah—!”

“Sorry about that,” An said quickly. “I was totally absorbed in singing. There’s an open seat over here.”

She gestured, and Yuu and Kohane sat down.

Kohane opened her mouth, hands fidgeting. “I-I, um—”

“I’ll have a Bittersweet Coffee with shaved ice,” Yuu said smoothly. “And for her—”

He glanced at Kohane, then smiled.

“—a café latte.”

“Eh?” Kohane blinked at him.

“I see~ Bittersweet Coffee with shaved ice, and one café latte, coming right up!” An replied cheerfully.

“So?” Yuu asked quietly, resting his elbow against the table as the lingering echoes of music faded into chatter. “What do you think of this place, Azusawa-san?”

Kohane hesitated.

“U-umm…”

The room still felt loud—not just with sound, but with presence. Voices overlapped, laughter burst and died, instruments were being tuned again in the background. It was nothing like the quiet spaces she was used to.

And yet…

“I… I was scared at first,” she admitted softly, eyes still lowered. “It was noisy, and everyone looked so… confident.”

Her grip tightened, then loosened.

“But when she started singing…” Kohane finally looked up, her eyes shimmering faintly under the café lights. “It felt like my chest was shaking. Like… something inside me woke up.”

She pressed a hand lightly against her heart, embarrassed by her own honesty.

“I don’t really understand it,” she said with a small, awkward smile. “But… I think it’s amazing. This place feels… alive.”

She glanced at Yuu, then quickly looked away again.

“…I’m glad you brought me here, Hazuki-kun.”

“Hmmm…” Yuu grinned, tilting his head slightly as he studied her expression. “I’m curious what something woke up inside you.”

Kohane’s breath hitched.

She looked down at once, heat blooming across her cheeks. Her bangs fell forward, hiding her eyes as she fumbled for words that refused to come.

(Even I don’t know what this feeling is…)

The music swelled again before the silence could grow awkward, saving her. She relaxed back into her seat as the next performance began, the low thrum of bass vibrating through the table, the rhythm threading itself into her chest.

They didn’t talk much after that.

They didn’t need to.

Kohane watched the stage quietly, eyes following every movement, every breath the musicians took before a note.

Yuu sat beside her, uncharacteristically still, letting the sound fill the space between them. From time to time, she caught him smiling, softly, as if he’d been waiting for this moment to happen.

For the first time in a long while, Kohane didn’t feel like she needed to shrink herself.

When they finally left WEEKEND GARAGE, the night air felt cooler, calmer.

The city lights blurred past as they walked, footsteps in easy sync. Yuu insisted on seeing her home, even though she kept telling him it wasn’t far.

“It’s fine,” he said simply. “Just in case.”

So he walked her all the way to the familiar street near her house, stopping only when the lights grew quieter, and the neighborhood softened into silence.

“Thank you,” Kohane said, bowing a little too deeply. “For today.”

Yuu waved it off with a small smile. “Get home safe, Azusawa-san.”

She watched him turn and disappear down the street before heading inside herself, heart still humming faintly, like an echo of music that hadn’t quite faded yet.

-Kohane's Room-

And as she lay awake later that night, one thought kept resurfacing, gentle but insistent.

(I’m really glad… Hazuki-kun pulled me there.)

But then she remembered something.

-Flashback-

They walked side by side beneath the dim glow of the streetlights, their shadows stretching and overlapping on the pavement. The city felt quieter here—less overwhelming, like it was holding its breath.

Yuu slowed his steps.

“Hey, Azusawa-san…”

She looked up at him, startled by the sudden seriousness in his voice. “Yes? Hazuki-kun?”

He hesitated, fingers curling briefly in his pockets, gaze fixed somewhere ahead rather than on her.

“…Do you want to change?”

Kohane stopped.

The question struck deeper than she expected, as if it had been waiting for her all along. She turned to face him, the warmth from the café still lingering in her chest, now mingling with something fragile and uncertain.

Yuu noticed and stopped too.

“…I do,” she said quietly, after a moment. Her hands clenched at her sides, nails biting into her palms. “But every time I try to change… I can’t.”

Her voice wavered, but she didn't look away.

"It's like my body freezes. I know what I should do, what I want to say… but when the moment comes, I just—" She shook her head, frustration clouding her eyes. "I end up the same as always."

The streetlight above them flickered softly.

Yuu listened without interrupting, his expression unreadable, calm in that steady way that made it feel safe to keep going.

"I don't want to stay like this," Kohane added, barely above a whisper. "But wanting it isn't enough."

For a moment, neither of them spoke. The city sounds drifted back in—the distant hum of traffic, the faint echo of music from somewhere far away.

Then Yuu finally turned toward her, his voice low but firm, carrying a strange kind of certainty.

"Then don't change all at once," he said. "Just take one step. Even if it's small. Even if it's messy."

Kohane blinked.

"…One step?"

He nodded. "You already took one today. You just don't realize it yet."

Her heart skipped, unsure whether to believe him—but wanting to.

"I'll help you."

"I'll help you change."

Kohane's eyes had widened at the time, breath catching in her throat. She hadn't trusted her voice then—only nodded silently, gaze dropping as warmth spread through her chest, unfamiliar and frightening and hopeful all at once.

—

Now, back in her room, that feeling returned.

Night had settled softly outside her window, the city lights peeking through the curtains like distant stars. Kohane sat on the edge of her bed, phone resting loosely in her hands, her school bag discarded near the door.

(That girl today was so cool…)

The memory replayed itself without asking—An on stage, voice ringing out without hesitation, eyes shining as if the world had narrowed down to nothing but her song. People who chased their dreams really did glow. Not in some magical way, but in a way that made it impossible to look away.

Kohane swallowed.

(I wonder what song she was singing…)

Her fingers moved almost on their own, tapping the screen.

“I’ve never heard that song before,” she murmured to the quiet room. “I wonder if there’s a video online…”

She hummed softly under her breath, clumsy and unsure, trying to recall the melody. The chorus slipped through her fingers no matter how hard she tried to grasp it.

“…That’s probably not enough to search with,” she admitted, a small, embarrassed laugh escaping her.

Her gaze drifted toward her homework pile.

“I should really start this…”

But then—

(I’ll help you change.)

Yuu’s voice echoed in her mind, steady and certain.

Kohane’s grip tightened around her phone.

“…Maybe,” she whispered, heart beating just a little faster, “I’ll try searching a bit longer.”

Her screen flickered.

Then—

A notification.

The display flashed unnaturally bright.

“I—huh?” Kohane gasped. “My phone just—?!”

The room seemed to grow quiet, as if even the air was listening.

From the speaker, a soft, familiar voice slipped through, clear and unmistakable.

“I found you.”

Kohane’s breath caught.

A sudden shimmer of light spilled out from Kohane’s phone, rising into the air like mist catching moonlight.

Pixels gathered. Lines formed.

A hologram bloomed into existence before her eyes.

Kohane froze.

“H—Huh…?”

Floating just above the floor was a familiar figure, translucent and softly glowing—long twin-tails swaying as if touched by a breeze that didn’t exist.

“…Miku…?” Kohane whispered. “A… hologram?”

The girl smiled warmly, eyes gentle yet knowing.

“Hello there, Kohane.”

Her voice was clear, resonant—too real to be a glitch.

“I’m the Miku from your SEKAI. It’s nice to meet you.”

Kohane’s breath hitched.

“W–Wait—!” She shot to her feet, heart racing. “H-How do you know my name?!”

The room felt smaller somehow, like the walls were closing in—or perhaps like something vast had just opened instead.

Miku only smiled wider, her glow brightening slightly, as if pleased.

—
To be continued

Chapter End Notes

🎄 Merry Christmas, everyone! 🎄

To all of you who’ve been following my fanfic since June 18, 2025, thank you so much for sticking with me! Your kudos, comments, and support mean the world, and I couldn’t have come this far without you.

I’m excited to let you know that an extra chapter will be published today by 10 PM GMT+8, so stay tuned!

Thank you again for being part of this journey! ❤️

Chapter 61: I found you! + Extra (Christmas Event)

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

Kohane stared at her phone, still half-expecting the glowing figure to reappear.

“A… Miku… hologram?” she murmured, the word feeling unreal on her tongue.

Just moments ago, that voice, clear and warm, had spoken her name so naturally, as if they had known each other for years.

I’m the Miku from your SEKAI.

Her chest tightened.

“Huh?! H-How did she know my name…?” Kohane whispered to the empty room, fingers curling against the hem of her sleeve.

Miku’s words echoed in her mind again, light and playful, yet filled with a strange certainty.

Hehe. Let’s talk about this in your SEKAI. You should come visit soon. Everyone is waiting.

“W-What…?” Kohane shook her head, trying to ground herself. “What was that supposed to mean…? Miku from… my SEKAI?”

The room fell silent.

Only the faint hum of the city outside remained.

She swallowed, then glanced back down at her phone—at the screen she’d been staring at earlier.

“…Oh.”

Her eyes widened.

“This is it…!” she breathed. “This is the song that girl at the café was singing!”

Excitement fluttered in her chest, cutting through the lingering unease.

“I can’t believe I actually found it… hehe.” A small smile tugged at her lips. “Maybe that strange Miku really did have something to do with this…”

She tapped play.

♪——!

The sound filled her room, bright and energetic—but Kohane frowned almost immediately.

“Huh…?”

She leaned closer, listening carefully.

“The chorus… it’s different than I remember.” Her brows knit together. “Did she… change it?”

～～♪～～♪

Her foot shifted unconsciously, trying to catch the beat.

“…The rhythm, too.” Kohane tilted her head. “The version she sang sounded smoother somehow. Like it flowed more naturally…”

——♪——♪

“I don’t know…” she murmured, conflicted. “This part sounds closer, but…”

Her voice trailed off.

As the song played on, a quiet realization settled in her heart, gentle, insistent, and impossible to ignore.

A week slipped by quietly, yet something within Kohane had begun to stir.

Miyamasuzaka Girls’ Academy — Class 1-A

Soft humming threaded through the classroom, barely audible beneath the scrape of chairs and the low murmur of voices.

“——♪——♪”

Kohane sat at her desk, eyes unfocused, fingers lightly tapping against her notebook as the melody slipped from her lips without her noticing.

“Hi, Kohane!”

She jolted.

Minori leaned over from the neighboring desk, smiling brightly. “You’ve been singing that a lot lately. What song is it?”

“A-Ah—!” Kohane flushed and fumbled for her phone. “U-Um… it’s this one…”

Minori took a look, eyes widening almost instantly.

“Huh?! I never pictured you as the type to listen to rap!”

Kohane’s shoulders stiffened. “I-I guess it is a little strange… for me to listen to this…”

“No, no! I didn’t mean it like that!” Minori waved her hands quickly. “It’s just unexpected, that’s all. Have you always been into this kind of music?”

Kohane shook her head. “No… I only started listening to it recently. I heard someone singing it in a café about a week ago.”

“A café?” Minori blinked. “Eh—were you there alone?”

“I-I was with someone,” Kohane said softly. “The place is called Weekend Garage. I looked it up afterward… Apparently, the owner used to be a pretty famous musician. Now it’s a spot where local music lovers gather to sing.”

Minori’s face lit up as she’d just been handed an idea straight from heaven.

“Really? I didn’t know places like that existed! A café with live music—sounds amazing!” She clasped her hands together. “Live music always feels so different, you know? Every time I go to an idol concert, I feel it vibrating right inside me. Like the sound reaches straight into your heart.”

She paused.

Then—

“……WAIT.”

Minori leaned in abruptly, eyes sparkling with dangerous curiosity.

“YOU WERE WITH SOMEONE?”

“D-Don’t shout, Minori…!” Kohane hissed, shrinking into herself as her face burned red.

Minori only grinned wider.

“Ohhh~?”

Minori tilted her head, studying Kohane with a knowing smile.

“D-Don’t get the wrong idea,” Kohane hurried to add, hands waving slightly. “It’s just… a friend of mine. He kind of… pulled me in.”

“I see~,” Minori said, dragging the word out playfully. Then her expression softened. “But still—aren’t you glad he did? I mean… I never expected to see this side of you. Not until now.”

Kohane hesitated.

“…Yeah,” she admitted quietly.

And as she said it, a familiar warmth stirred in her chest.

(I wonder…)

(If I went back there. If I saw that girl again…)

(Would I feel that same sensation?)

After Class — Vivid Street

The air buzzed with conversation and distant laughter, footsteps echoing between buildings as Kohane stepped onto the street.

Chattering.

She slowed, eyes drifting around her.

"…Am I imagining things?"

Her shoulders loosened, just a little.

"This place doesn't feel nearly as scary as before," she murmured to herself. "Is it because it's still light out?"

Her gaze traced the walls lining the street—layers of color, sharp lines and bold shapes overlapping one another.

"And when I really look…" Her eyes widened. "This graffiti is amazing."

She stepped closer, studying the strokes, the way emotions seemed to spill directly onto concrete.

"This is supposed to be a kind of art, right…?"

Her mind echoed with a familiar voice.

Graffiti is self-expression. A sense of freedom. An artistic outlet to build identity.

Kohane's fingers curled slightly at her side.

"…Self-expression," she whispered.

For the first time, instead of feeling overwhelmed by the noise and color of Vivid Street, she felt something else—

Curiosity.

Kohane slowed her steps, the corners of her cardigan brushing against her sides as she took in the street once more.

"…Maybe this place is all right after all," she murmured.

The tension she'd felt before was gone—replaced by something quieter, steadier. If she remembered correctly…

"Weekend Garage should be just around this corner."

A few steps away, someone passing by paused.

"……"

(Did I just hear someone say Weekend Garage?)

The boy glanced over his shoulder briefly, then shrugged to himself.

Oh well. I've still got some time before I'm supposed to meet Akito. Might as well kill some time.)

He continued on, her presence fading into the rhythm of the street.

Kohane's eyes lit up as a familiar sign came into view.

Weekend Garage

Jingle—

The café bell rang as she stepped inside.

“Welcome—! Hm?”

The voice came from the counter.

Kohane froze. “Ah—! U-Um…”

“Oh!” The girl behind the counter leaned forward, eyes lighting up. “Aren’t you the girl who was here with someone the other day? Watching from that table?”

“Huh…?”

“I remember,” the girl continued with a grin. “We don’t get many girls our age in here, so it stood out. I’m really happy you came back!”

She turned and raised her voice cheerfully.

“Hey, Dad! That cute girl who came in to check us out last week is back!”

From behind the counter, a calm, older voice answered.

“Is that so? Welcome.”

The girl beamed, spreading her arms slightly as if presenting the entire café.

“Welcome to Weekend Garage!”

Kohane’s breath caught.

“…!!”
“Found it… Weekend Garage!”

The letters looked the same as before. The door, the windows, the faint hum of music leaking through the walls.

She stopped.

Her fingers hovered uncertainly at her sides.

(Is it really okay for me to go back in there…?)

For a moment, doubt crept in—old habits tugging at her heels.

Then—

Smack.

She lightly slapped both cheeks, the soft sound snapping her out of it.

“No,” she whispered, shaking her head. “It’s time to change… I already made up my mind.”

Her chest tightened as a familiar voice surfaced in her memory.

I'll help you change.

Kohane swallowed, then nodded to herself.

"…So I've got to open the door."

Weekend Garage

Jingle—

The café bell rang as she stepped inside.

"Welcome—! Hm?"

The voice came from the counter.

Kohane froze. "Ah—! U-Um…"

"Oh!" The girl behind the counter leaned forward, eyes lighting up. "Aren't you the girl who was here with someone the other day? Watching from that table?"

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"I remember," the girl continued with a grin. "We don't get many girls our age in here, so it stood out. I'm really happy you came back!"

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"Hey, Dad! That cute girl who came in to check us out last week is back!"

From behind the counter, a calm, older voice answered.

"Is that so? Welcome."

The girl beamed, spreading her arms slightly as if presenting the entire café.

"Welcome to Weekend Garage!"

Kohane's breath caught.

"…!!"

The warmth of the space, the music lingering in the air, the way she was greeted without hesitation —

Her heart began to race, not with fear this time…

…but with something that felt like the start of change.

Meanwhile—somewhere else.

"Hmm?"

The voice carried a note of mild amusement.

“Miku, where did you get off to? You look quite pleased about something.”

Another figure chuckled softly.
“Ah… don’t tell me you already went to meet them.”

Miku turned back, hands clasped behind her back, smiling.

“Yeah. Just a quick look, though,” she said lightly. “I don’t think it’ll be much longer before they come visit.”

Before anyone could respond—

Jingle.

The bell above the door rang.

“Hello.”

All three Virtual Singers straightened at once, eyes widening.

“…It’s been a while since I’ve entered this SEKAI.”

Miku blinked, surprise flashing across her face. “Who are you?”

The newcomer paused, then let out a small, sheepish sigh.

“Ah… right. I forgot.”

He tapped the face of his smartwatch.

“Miku, can you come out?”

For a split second, nothing happened.

Then—

Bzzz—crackle.

A hologram burst forth from the watch, its form unstable, flickering with digital noise. The familiar twin-tails shimmered as the image stabilized—almost.

“Hello, everyone.”

Miku gasped, eyes widening. “A–Another me?!”

“That’s right.” The glitching Miku tilted her head, smiling. “I’m you… but from another SEKAI.”

“That’s interesting…” came a calm voice from behind the counter.
Then, with a hint of curiosity, “Then that means there’s another version of me too?”

The glitching Miku turned toward her. “Exactly, MEIKO. You’re correct.”

She then looked back at the boy beside her.

“Yuu,” she said gently, “I think it’s time to connect this SEKAI to the School SEKAI.”

Yuu’s lips curved into a faint smile as he lowered his wrist.

“I was just about to do that…”

“I might as well… give them their memories,” he murmured, scanning the floating shard. “Let’s see… was it the memory fragment?”

The glitching Miku nodded once, her form flickering faintly with approval.

“Ah… here it is,” Yuu said, pausing for a moment. Then, with a slight smirk, he added, “But you know, instead of giving Ichika-san a headache, we could’ve resorted to this method.”

“I… didn’t look for it properly,” the glitching Miku admitted, a hint of self-reproach in her voice.

“It’s alright,” Yuu replied, tapping the fragment.

Carefully, he clicked it and lifted his hand, walking slowly toward the three virtual singers. He pointed at each of them, letting the tip of his finger graze their skin one by one.

Time seemed to pause for a heartbeat. Then, gradually, a soft shimmer ran across their forms.

One by one, they stopped, the glitching haze fading as clarity returned to their eyes.

“Did it work?” Yuu asked, his voice barely above a whisper.

“Ah…! Yuu!” the Miku of Street SEKAI cried, recognition flooding her tone. “You’re here!”

Yuu’s lips curved into a faint smile.

“Oh… it did.”

Yuu lowered his hand, the glow of the Memory Fragment finally dimming to nothing.

“How are you guys?” he asked quietly, eyes moving between them. “Do you remember everything?”

For a moment, there was only silence.

Then Miku pressed a hand to her chest, her eyes widening as if something long-forgotten had just snapped back into place.

“…Yeah,” she said softly, then looked up at him with a bright smile. “I remember. The songs, the streets… and you.”

MEIKO let out a slow breath, resting a hand on the counter to steady herself. “So that’s what that empty feeling was,” she murmured. “It’s like a missing verse finally came back.”

Behind her, the others exchanged glances, subtle nods, shared understanding, each of them feeling the same quiet certainty settle in their core.

Miku stepped forward, her expression warm but tinged with relief.

“Welcome back, Yuu,” she said. “You’ve been gone longer than you think.”

Yuu gave a small, almost sheepish smile.
“Sorry about that,” he replied. “Things got… complicated.”

Miku laughed lightly. “They always do.”

The glitching Miku watched from the side, her form stabilizing just a little more as the connection completed.
“Good,” she said. “Then this SEKAI is ready again.”

Yuu glanced toward the unseen streets beyond, where music and footsteps were slowly drawing closer.

“…Yeah,” he said under his breath. “And it’s just in time.”

With a few precise taps on his smartwatch, the last line of code settled into place. Yuu let out a slow breath, tension finally easing from his shoulders.

“With this…” he said, glancing at the dimming interface, “…School SEKAI and Street SEKAI should be synchronized.”

He turned to the others. “How do you guys feel now?”

The Miku of the Street SEKAI blinked, then her eyes lit up as if a new horizon had suddenly opened before her.
“Oh? I can access another SEKAI!?” she exclaimed, tilting her head slightly. “Hmmm… it feels… green.”

Len leaned closer, curiosity plain on his face. “That’s a weird way to describe it.”

MEIKO folded her arms with a small smile. “Sounds like her, though.”

Yuu gave a short laugh. “Anyway, I should probably explain everything.”

The Street SEKAI’s Miku, Len, and MEIKO exchanged quick nods before turning their full attention to him.

Yuu spoke calmly, carefully—about the reset, about how everything had been stripped back to zero. About fragmented memories, disconnected SEKAI, and the delicate balance holding them together. He explained how the bonds that once existed had been severed, not erased, and how the world had quietly rewound itself to the very beginning.

As he talked, their expressions shifted—confusion giving way to understanding, understanding to quiet gravity.

After a few minutes, MEIKO broke the silence.

“So basically…” she said slowly, eyes narrowing as she pieced it together, “…we’re back at the point where Kohane hasn’t met everyone yet?”

Yuu nodded. “Yeah. This is the very start.”

Len whistled softly. “That’s rough.”

The Street SEKAI’s Miku looked off to the side, toward where faint music seemed to echo from somewhere far away.
“…But she’s already starting to change,” she said gently. “I felt it.”

Yuu followed her gaze, his expression softening.
“That’s why this time matters,” he replied. “Even if the world reset… feelings didn’t completely disappear.”

MEIKO smiled faintly. “Then maybe this ‘start’ isn’t really the beginning.”

Yuu didn’t answer right away. Instead, he looked toward the door—toward the streets where Kohane was taking her first hesitant steps forward.

“…Yeah,” he murmured. “Maybe it isn’t.”

Yuu’s gaze drifted toward the entrance, where the bells hung motionless, waiting.

“But maybe in the next few hours…” he said quietly, more to himself than anyone else, “… Azusawa-san, An… they’ll be here.”

The thought lingered in the air—soft, uncertain, yet filled with promise. The start of something fragile. Something important.

Then, with a bright step forward and a grin that cut straight through the tension, the Street SEKAI’s Miku spun around to face him.

“Yeah!” she said, voice clear and confident, almost sparkling. “Don’t worry about it, Yuu! We’re gonna make sure everything sails smooth!”

She planted her hands on her hips, eyes shining with unwavering certainty—as if the future itself had already agreed with her.

Yuu blinked, then let out a small, helpless chuckle.

“…Thanks."

-Changing back to Kohane's perspective.-

The warm ceramic of the mug seeped gently into Kohane’s palms as it was set down in front of her.

“Here’s your café au lait,” An’s father said with an easy smile. “Enjoy.”

“Th-Thank you very much,” Kohane replied, bowing her head a little too deeply.

She watched as he untied his apron, slinging it over the counter.

“Hm?” An tilted her head. “Where’re you going, Dad? You heading out somewhere?”

“Got a call,” he said, already halfway to the door. “Those good coffee beans finally came in. I’ll be back before it’s time to open the bar. Keep an eye on things till then, yeah?”

“Roger that.” An glanced around the café, then shrugged. “We’ve only got one customer anyway, so take your time.”

The bell chimed softly as the door closed.

Kohane’s shoulders stiffened.

(N-Now it’s just the two of us…)

The silence wasn’t uncomfortable—but it was loud. The low hum of equipment, the faint scent of coffee and wood, the echo of music still lingering in the air.

An leaned an elbow against the counter, studying her with an amused smile.
“Hmm? You’re not nervous, are you?”

“Huh?” Kohane jolted. “O-Oh—S-Sorry!”

An laughed, bright and unrestrained. “Relax. There’s no reason to be so uptight.” Her eyes flicked to Kohane’s uniform. “Judging from that, you go to Miyamasuzaka, right? We’re probably about the same age.”

“The same age…?” Kohane blinked. “I-I’m a first year.”

“I knew it!” An snapped her fingers. “I’m a first year too—Kamiyama High.”

“R-Really?” Kohane’s eyes widened. “My friend goes to Kamiyama too… but I thought you were older than me…”

“Hahaha!” An grinned. “Guess I’ll take that as a compliment. I’m An Shiraishi. Nice to meet you.”

“Oh!” Kohane hurriedly straightened. “I’m Kohane Azusawa! I-It’s nice to meet you, um… Miss Shiraishi.”

“An,” she corrected gently. “We’re the same age, remember?” Her expression softened. “I’m really glad you came back, Kohane. We don’t get many girls around here—mostly guys who admire my dad.”

“That was your dad who just left, right?” Kohane asked. “I heard he owns the place… and that he was a famous musician.”

“That’s right!” An said proudly. “You know your stuff.”

“O-Oh, I just looked it up online,” Kohane admitted. “It said he was active on Vivid Street for a long time.”

“Yeah. He retired about two years ago and opened this café,” An explained. “A lot of his old friends and fans still drop by.”

“I also read about Nagi,” Kohane added hesitantly. “She’s your dad’s friend… right?”

An's eyes lit up. "Yep! And one day—I'm gonna surpass them."

The conviction in her voice made Kohane's chest tighten.

"W-Were those the people you were singing with earlier?" she asked.

"Mm-hmm," An nodded. "They're musicians who really admire my dad. They invite me to sing with them at events all the time."

"Events…?" Kohane echoed. "Do you perform often?"

"All the time," An said casually. "There are lots of clubs around here. Finding gigs isn't too hard."

That explained it, Kohane thought—the ease in her posture, the confidence in her voice.

"…You looked really cool," Kohane said softly. "When I saw you last time."

An blinked. "Last time…? Oh—when you came with someone, right?" She tilted her head. "Kamiyama uniform?"

Kohane nodded.

"Y-You were amazing," she said, gripping her mug. "A-Actually… I came back because… I wanted to hear you sing again."

An's smile widened, warm and knowing.

"Oh," she said lightly. "So that's why you came back."

An's eyes sparkled, a playful challenge dancing in them.

"In that case," she said, already stepping away from the counter, "how about I sing a song?"

"H-Huh?" Kohane barely had time to react.

Weekend Garage — Stage

An hopped up onto the small stage with an easy confidence, rolling her shoulders once as if shaking off the ordinary world.

"Oh, it's just me this time," she said over her shoulder, "so it won't be like the mic relay. But—here goes."

"W-Wait—!" Kohane froze. "M-My heart's not ready for this…!"

An only grinned.

♪——!

The first note rang out, raw and vivid, slicing cleanly through the café.

Kohane sucked in a breath.

!!

(It's… completely different.)

The sound wasn't polished like the video. It was closer. Louder. It wrapped around her chest and pressed straight against her heart.

Her pulse spiked, blood roaring in her ears.

(This feeling again…!)

An's voice surged.

♪!!!

The rhythm rolled through the room, bouncing off the walls, vibrating through the floor, through Kohane herself. Every word carried weight—confidence, longing, heat. It wasn't just a song; it was a declaration.

Kohane's fingers trembled around her cup.

(She's shining…!)

The final note rang out and faded, leaving behind a charged silence.

"…!"

Kohane realized she'd been holding her breath.

"She's so cool…" she breathed, the words slipping out before she could stop them.

An laughed softly, wiping her brow. "Phew! So—what did you—hm?"

She paused, noticing Kohane's wide eyes and flushed face, and her smile softened, curious and pleased all at once.

Kohane's eyes shone as she leaned forward, words spilling out faster than she could stop them.

"Y-You were so cool! Thank you, An! Especially that part where you started freestyling—when it went like—"
She hummed the melody softly.
"——♪ And then there was that other part, where you switched it up like— ～～♪ And the way you ended it too…"

An froze.

"…!"

She stared at Kohane as if something invisible had just clicked into place.

"Hey, Kohane," An said slowly, a grin creeping onto her face. "Can you sing?"

"W-What?" Kohane stiffened.

“Why don’t you try singing real quick?” An said, already reaching for the mic stand. “Like you just did now. It sounds like you’ve got the lyrics memorized. Here—”

She pressed the microphone into Kohane’s hands.

“W-Wait! I—I can’t sing in a place like this!” Kohane squeaked, shoulders tensing.

“Please?” An leaned closer, eyes bright with excitement. “I really want to hear you sing. Don’t worry—I know you’ll be great.”

“I-If it’s just a little…” Kohane swallowed hard. “…Promise you won’t laugh?”

“No problem!” An said instantly.

Kohane drew in a shaky breath.

——♪

Her voice slipped out, quiet at first—thin, trembling, almost afraid of its own echo.

An’s eyes widened.

!!
(I knew it.)

——♪ ——♪

Kohane’s rhythm wavered, and her voice lacked confidence, but there was something else there—something warm and clear that carried effortlessly through the room.

(Her timing’s a little off… and she’s not singing from the heart yet, but—)
An’s chest tightened.
(That voice. It’s gentle, but it reaches you. It makes you want to listen… No—it makes you want to sing with her.)

Without thinking, An jumped back in.

♪ ——! ——! ——!

Their voices overlapped—Kohane’s soft and careful, An’s bold and vivid—filling the space between them, colliding and blending in a way that felt natural, inevitable.

——♪ ——♪

When the song ended, Kohane gasped, breathless.

“H-Huff… huff… That… felt great!”

An stared at her, stunned—then burst into a wide, exhilarated grin.

“I found you,” she said, voice shaking with excitement. “I’ve finally found you!”

Kohane blinked. “Huh?”

“Kohane—let’s team up!” An grabbed her hands without hesitation.
“Let’s sweep the world off its feet with our performances!”

Silence fell like a dropped beat.

“…Whaaaat?!”

[To be continued]

--- EXTRA CHAPTER ---

December 25…

The time of year when it was a common tradition of the world.

where people spent their days with friends and family, laughing beneath strings of lights and exchanging warmth in small, ordinary ways.

— Kamiyama High —
Class 1-B

“Hazuki-kun. It’s almost winter break.”

Toya was the first to speak, his calm voice cutting gently through the quiet as Yuu zipped his bag shut.

“Yeah…” Yuu replied, slinging the strap over his shoulder. “Time sure flies.”

His gaze drifted toward the window. Outside, the sky was a pale winter blue, clouds hanging low as if weighed down by the cold itself. The classroom felt unusually subdued—no frantic chatter about tests, no groans over homework. Just the scrape of chairs against the floor and distant laughter echoing faintly from the hallway.

“It doesn’t really feel like Christmas,” Yuu added after a pause.

Toya hummed softly in agreement. “I suppose it doesn’t. Everyone’s too busy preparing for something else. When you stop to think about it… the day passes before you even realize it.”

They stood from their seats and left the classroom together, footsteps falling into an easy rhythm as they walked down the hallway.

“Aoyagi-kun,” Yuu said suddenly, glancing sideways at him. “You’re spending your time with your family, right?”

“Yeah,” Toya answered without hesitation.

Yuu let out a small sound—something between a hum and a breath. “I see.”

Toya glanced at him. “And you?”

Yuu didn’t answer immediately.

“Of course,” he said after a moment.

The words came out easily. Too easily.

Toya didn't press further, but he noticed it—the brief pause, the way Yuu's gaze lingered on the floor instead of forward.

Yuu adjusted his grip on his bag and kept walking.

Just then, An and Akito were already waiting near the stairwell.

"You two are slow!" Akito called out, arms crossed as he leaned against the railing.

"Sorry," Yuu said. "The teacher had a few announcements."

Akito clicked his tongue. "Figures."

"Well… it's fine," he added after a beat, pushing himself upright. "So, same as usual?"

An nodded immediately, her expression brightening. "Of course! We're heading to WEEKEND GARAGE."

She grinned, already turning on her heel. "I bet Kohane's already there, practicing her vocals."

As the four stepped out of Kamiyama High, the cold air greeted them immediately. They walked along the side of the street, breath faintly visible as winter settled in.

"By the way, Yuu," An said suddenly, glancing over her shoulder. "You're spending Christmas with your family, right?"

"Yeah," Yuu replied. "I bet your café's going to be pretty busy, huh."

An laughed. "Obviously."

Akito nodded to himself. "Well, obviously I'll be spending Christmas with my family."

Yuu glanced at him. "Then tell your sister 'Merry Christmas' for me."

Akito stopped walking. "And why the hell would I do that?" he shot back. "Tell her yourself."

Yuu blinked. "Seriously?"

An snorted, barely holding back a laugh as Akito scowled and started walking again.

The familiar sign of WEEKEND GARAGE came into view, its lights glowing softly against the early evening sky. Compared to the streets around it, the place felt warmer somehow—like a small pocket of sound and color tucked away from the cold.

Music drifted faintly from inside. Not loud. Just enough to be recognizable.

"Looks like we were right," An said, slowing her pace. "She's already here."

Near the entrance, Kohane stood with her phone in hand, humming quietly under her breath. Her shoulders tensed slightly as she practiced, voice barely louder than the street around her. Even from a distance, Yuu could tell—she was focused. Completely.

“Kohane!” An called out, waving.

Kohane startled, nearly dropping her phone. “Ah—An!”

She looked up, eyes lighting up as she spotted the others. “Shinonome-kun! Aoyagi-kun! Yuu!”

“You’re early,” Akito said, hands in his pockets.

“I-I wanted to warm up a bit,” Kohane replied, fidgeting slightly before smiling. “Um… Merry Christmas.”

The words came out soft, but sincere.

Yuu paused for half a second—then smiled back.

“Merry Christmas.”

The door to WEEKEND GARAGE opened behind them, music spilling out in full this time.

Warmth followed.

“But really…” Yuu murmured as he stepped inside, eyes drifting around the space. “Mr. Ken really went all out this year.”

WEEKEND GARAGE was glowing.

Strings of warm lights hung across the ceiling beams, looping between speakers and stage equipment. A small Christmas tree stood near the counter, decorated with mismatched ornaments—some clearly handmade. Even the posters along the walls had tiny ribbons taped to their corners.

Ken leaned over the counter, wiping down a mug. “Hey, don’t make it sound like I overdid it,” he said with a laugh. “It’s only once a year.”

An grinned. “You say that every year.”

“And every year it gets more ridiculous,” Akito added.

Kohane looked around, eyes sparkling. “It’s… really nice.”

“Speaking of which…” An said, clasping her hands together. “Should we perform this Christmas too?”

“Isn’t that the plan?” Akito replied without missing a beat. “I mean, this is about expanding our territory as a squad.”

Toya nodded. “I’m glad you said it, Shiraishi. Actually—while we were reviewing for exams, I was already in the middle of composing.”

“Eh?” Akito and Yuu said at the same time.

Akito shot him a look. “Who even does that?”

“Haha…” Kohane laughed softly. “That’s really impressive, Aoyagi-kun.”

An’s eyes lit up instantly. “Wait—let me see! Let me see!”

She leaned in eagerly, already reaching for Toya’s phone.

Yuu watched them with a small smile. The conversation flowed naturally, effortlessly—plans forming without pressure, music filling the space between them before a single note was even played.

If they performed this Christmas…

He wondered what kind of sound it would make.

“Yuu? Yuu! Are you listening?”

An waved her hand in front of his face, snapping him out of his thoughts.

“Eh—? Huh?” Yuu blinked. “What was it?”

Akito frowned. “Hey… are you even listening?”

Kohane tilted her head slightly, concern softening her expression. “Are you okay, Hazuki-kun?”

“I’m fine,” Yuu said quickly.

Too quickly.

"I just spaced... out, sorry."

An studied him for a moment, then smiled. “Well, don’t zone out on us now. This is the important part.”

Yuu nodded. “Yeah.”

After that…

“So in the end,” Yuu said, letting out a small sigh, “you guys basically turned me into a DJ.”

“Well,” An replied with a grin, “a DJ’s still part of the squad.”

Toya nodded. “Sorry, Hazuki-kun. I know you’re good at vocals too, but this time, Azusawa-san and I will take that role.”

“That’s understandable, Aoyagi-kun,” Yuu said. Then he tilted his head slightly. “More importantly… why did you think of me as the DJ?”

Toya answered without hesitation. “Because you can read our performance. I trust you with our music.”

“I agree,” An added. “Hazuki can read everyone’s choreography. It’s actually pretty impressive.”

“D-Don’t praise me too much…” Yuu muttered, scratching the back of his head.

(Mostly thanks to Project SEKAI’s rhythm notes.)

An clapped her hands together. “Anyway—let’s perform it on December 27. Is that okay with everyone?”

They exchanged glances, then nodded one by one.

“Great!” An said. “Let’s meet here again.”

And just like that, the gathering loosened.

Toya offered to walk Kohane home, the two of them leaving together in quiet conversation. Akito glanced at his phone, scowled, and bolted toward the door.

“Family?” An asked.

“Obviously,” he shot back, already halfway out.

Yuu watched them go, the warmth of WEEKEND GARAGE settling into something quieter as the space emptied.

“Hm?” An glanced at him. “What about you, Yuu? You’re not heading home?”

“I’ll stay here for a bit,” he said, looking around. Then, after a pause—
“Actually… An. Do you want to visit the Street SEKAI?”

She blinked. “Huh? I was about to do that once you got home.”

Yuu met her gaze. “Then… let’s go together.”

An smiled. “Of course.”

As soon as they looked around, Yuu and An exchanged glances. Without a word, they nodded, closed their eyes—and the world shifted.

When they opened them again, they stood within the STREET SEKAI.

“Hmm…” An looked up at the sky. “Nothing’s changed—aside from the snow.”

Soft flakes drifted down from the night sky, dissolving before they touched the ground.

“What about the café?” she added.

They headed inside.

The warmth hit them immediately. Near the corner of the café, a Christmas tree stood proudly, its branches half-decorated. KAITO and MEIKO were busy setting up a shiny ornament at the top.

“Hello, everyone… Merry Christmas,” Yuu greeted.

“Merry Christmas!”

“Oya?” KAITO turned around and smiled. “An and Yuu! Merry Christmas.”

“Hello, Yuu! Hello, An!” MEIKO waved cheerfully.

“I—I can help!” Yuu said at once, already hurrying over.

“I’ll help too!” An added, following right behind him.

“Big thanks,” KAITO said with a grin.

As Yuu carefully adjusted an ornament, he glanced around. “Where’s everyone else?”

“Len and Rin are probably on their way here with the Christmas gifts, Miku’s with Luka.”

KAITO nodded. “We’re having a gift exchange later. Of course, you two have presents under the tree as well—though you’ll have to open them later.”

“Eh?” An blinked. “You guys got us gifts? But we didn’t—”

“Don’t worry!” MEIKO said quickly, cutting her off with a bright smile. “We just wanted to express our love to you all.”

Yuu paused, fingers tightening slightly around the ornament.

Love.

In this place, it was spoken so easily—

“Then… we’d gladly take them,” Yuu said, his voice quiet but sincere.

MEIKO smiled, her expression softening. “That’s good.”

KAITO nodded as he adjusted the last ornament. “It wouldn’t be Christmas without sharing something, after all.”

An looked up at the tree, lights reflecting in her eyes. “It’s kinda nice,” she said. “Being here like this.”

Yuu agreed silently.

“Are we late?!”

The Kagamine siblings burst into the café, the door swinging open as cold air rushed in behind them.

“Nope!” MEIKO laughed. “You’re right on time.”

“Waaah, it’s so warm in here!” Rin said, shaking off imaginary snow. “And look—it’s already decorated!”

Len held up a bag proudly. “We brought the gifts!”

“You two are surprisingly prepared,” An said, raising an eyebrow.

“Hey, hey, don’t sound so shocked!” Rin protested. “It’s Christmas!”

Yuu smiled faintly as the noise filled the café. The space felt fuller now—brighter somehow.

KAITO clapped his hands together. “Alright then. That just leaves Luka and Miku.”

Almost on cue, the door opened again—this time more gently.

Soft footsteps followed.

The faint hum of a melody drifted in with the cold air.

Yuu looked up.

The door opened once more—slowly this time.

Pink hair caught the light first as Luka stepped inside, snowflakes melting as they brushed against her coat. Behind her, Miku followed, hands clasped together as if she’d been holding onto a tune the whole way there.

“Sorry to keep everyone waiting,” Luka said with a gentle smile. “Merry Christmas.”

“Merry Christmas!” Miku echoed brightly.

“There you are!” Rin called out. “We were this close to starting without you!”

Luka laughed softly. “I see we made it just in time, then.”

Miku’s eyes sparkled as she looked around the café. “Wow… it’s beautiful. Everyone worked really hard.”

“We did,” KAITO said proudly. “Which means—it’s time.”

He gestured toward the Christmas tree, lights twinkling as wrapped gifts rested beneath it.

“Gift exchange, everyone.”

Rin gasped dramatically. “Finally!”

Len handed over the bag he’d been carrying. “Okay, okay—who’s first?”

MEIKO stepped forward, placing a neatly wrapped box beneath the tree. “I’ll start.”

One by one, the Virtual Singers joined in—gifts exchanged with laughter, soft teasing, and quiet thanks. Rin nearly shook her box apart before opening it. Len pretended not to care, only to grin the moment he peeked inside. Luka’s smile lingered warmly as she accepted hers, while Miku held her gift close, as if it were something precious even before unwrapping it.

Yuu watched from just beside An, the glow of the tree reflecting in his eyes.

It was strange—watching something so simple unfold in a place born from emotion.

Yet it felt real.

As another gift changed hands, MEIKO glanced toward them. “Don’t worry. Yours are coming later.”

An chuckled. “Guess we’ll have to wait.”

Yuu nodded.

“Alright,” KAITO said once the last ribbon fell away and the chatter settled. His voice carried a gentle finality. “Now then… it’s your turn.”

He gestured toward the Christmas tree.

An blinked, momentarily caught off guard. “Ours?”

MEIKO nodded, already crouching beside the tree as the lights reflected softly in her eyes. “Of course. We didn’t forget.”

She pulled out a small box wrapped in vivid red paper. The ribbon was tied unevenly, loops crossing where they shouldn’t have—clumsy, enthusiastic, unmistakably Rin.

“For you!” Rin declared, hands on her hips.

An laughed as she accepted it, the paper crinkling under her fingers. “This already feels dangerous.”

“Hey,” Len said, arms crossed, “we helped too.”

She loosened the ribbon and lifted the lid.

Nestled inside was a gray hoodie—simple in color, but warm to the touch, its fabric thick and soft, meant to be worn through long nights and colder walks home.

An went quiet.

For a moment, she just stared.

“…This is really nice,” she said at last, voice lower than before. “Thank you.”

Lights flickered as someone adjusted the tree.

“Up next…” MEIKO said, turning. “Yuu.”

Yuu stiffened slightly.

She reached beneath the branches once more, this time drawing out a smaller box wrapped in pale blue paper. Snowflake patterns shimmered faintly across its surface, glowing softly with the light of the SEKAI.

“And for you.”

Yuu hesitated before taking it, as if the weight of the moment had settled into his hands. “Are you sure…?”

KAITO smiled, warm and certain. “Of course.”

Carefully—almost reverently—Yuu opened the box.

Inside rested a pair of sleek headphones, understated in design but unmistakably chosen with care. Beside them lay a thin charm shaped like a musical note, its edges glowing faintly, pulsing in time

with the quiet hum of the SEKAI itself.

“So you can listen,” Miku said softly, stepping closer, her voice gentle as falling snow, “and feel the music—whether you’re on stage or not.”

Yuu’s fingers curled around the charm.

The glow warmed his palm.

“…Thank you,” he said, the words barely above a breath. “Really.”

“I’m kind of curious what the others will get,” An said, glancing back at the tree, its lights still shimmering.

“Well, they're probably still busy celebrating... but just in case, you should text them about the gifts."

"Yeah, Good idea!"

She checked the time, then stiffened slightly. “Ah—I’ve gotta go. My dad’s probably about to close the café.”

Yuu smiled faintly. “Yeah… then I should head out too.”

They turned back toward the others.

“Everyone—thank you for the gifts,” An said, bowing deeply.

Yuu followed suit. “Really. Thank you.”

“Anytime!” Rin said cheerfully.

“Take care on your way home,” Luka added.

“And don’t forget,” MEIKO said with a grin, “we’ll see you again soon.”

Yuu straightened and gave a small nod. “Yeah.”

“Merry Christmas,” An said.

“Merry Christmas,” Yuu echoed.

The words felt lighter this time—

not forced, not distant.

As they stepped out of the café and the door closed behind them, the glow of the STREET SEKAI lingered just a little longer, like a song fading out at the perfect note.

With that, they returned to WEEKEND GARAGE, the warmth of the place wrapping around them one last time.

“Well then,” Yuu said, shifting his bag. “An… I’m heading home.”

His gaze drifted to the new headphones in his hands.

(Oh. They're Bluetooth.)

He pulled out his phone, connecting them quickly. The familiar glow of his playlist appeared on the screen just as he lifted the headphones—

—and suddenly, they were gone.

"Huh—?"

An had already taken them, placing them gently over his ears. The world dulled at the edges as the soft seal settled against him.

She leaned back, examining him.

"Hm~ Not bad!" An grinned. "It suits you."

"Y—Yeah…" Yuu stammered, heat rushing to his face as he looked away. "Th-Thank you."

An's eyes widened. "Wait a second—Yuu, your face is red!"

He cleared his throat sharply. "A-Anyway! I'm heading home now. See you tomorrow."

An smirked. "Retreating?"

"Yes. Yes, I am."

And before she could say anything else, Yuu bolted out of WEEKEND GARAGE, the bell above the door ringing sharply as he fled into the cold night.

Only after a few steps did he stop.

He turned back once, the warmth of the café spilling faintly onto the sidewalk.

"Merry Christmas, An," he whispered.

Then he turned away, switching from a run to a steady walk—
music finally filling his ears, quiet and warm, carrying him home.

Meanwhile—An's perspective.

An stood frozen where she was, the bell above the door still swaying faintly from where Yuu had rushed out.

She stared ahead for a moment, mind blank—
then slowly lifted a hand to cover her mouth.

…What did I just do?

The image replayed itself uninvited: the way his shoulders had stiffened, the way his eyes had widened just slightly, the heat that rushed to his face the moment the headphones settled over his ears.

An exhaled, half a laugh slipping out.

“So… you can make that face too, huh,” she murmured.

Her grin softened into something quieter.

Outside, footsteps faded into the distance. Inside, WEEKEND GARAGE felt warmer than before.

An turned back toward the counter, heart still beating a little faster than usual.

Christmas really was dangerous.

Chapter End Notes

I'm sorry to the one who said "IchiYuu." but don't worry, I support it! <3

Chapter 62: A Bet

Meanwhile — elsewhere

Live House

The stage lights dimmed, leaving behind the lingering hum of amplifiers and the scent of sweat and electricity.

“You performed really well today,” a voice said from backstage. “Thanks, guys.”

“Thank you for tonight,” came the polite reply.

A pair of staff members lingered near the soundboard as the crowd filtered out.

“Man,” the newer one muttered, rubbing his arms, “BAD DOGS were insane tonight. Their set actually gave me goosebumps.”

The older staff member chuckled knowingly. “Yeah. They’re the real deal. You do this long enough, you start spotting diamonds in the rough. But those two?” He shook his head. “They stood out from day one. Almost unfair, really.”

“I noticed,” the newbie said, glancing toward the stage. “A lot of people clearly come just to see them. Hard to believe they’re still in high school.”

Nearby, Akito wiped sweat from his brow while Toya adjusted his gloves.

“Toya,” Akito said, tone sharp but focused, “I’m thinking of changing up the set list for next month’s events.”

Toya nodded. “I was thinking the same. A lot of the audience has heard our usual songs already. Adding our more polished tracks would make more sense.”

A musician passing by clapped them both on the shoulders. “Hey—great set tonight, Akito! Toya! You two have been performing almost every week lately. Really giving it everything you’ve got.”

“Naturally,” Akito replied without hesitation. “When Ken was our age, shows like this were nothing to him.”

“And if we’re going to surpass RAD WEEKEND,” Toya added quietly, “we’ll need every bit of experience we can get.”

The musician laughed, shaking his head. “You’ve been saying that forever. Still… the idea of anyone topping RAD WEEKEND is crazy.”

Akito’s eyes narrowed. “It’s not crazy. And even if it were, it wouldn’t matter. We already decided.”

The man raised his hands placatingly. “Hey, easy. I know how good you guys are. But RAD WEEKEND was something else. Akito—you were there, right? You know what I mean.”

His voice softened, almost reverent.

“Especially that woman… Nagi. She was terrifyingly strong. That night, the crowd, the energy—everything lined up perfectly. Tonight’s show doesn’t even come close.”

“Tch,” Akito clicked his tongue. “I know. That’s exactly why we’re pushing ourselves this hard.”

Toya said nothing, gaze lowered, fists clenched at his sides.

The musician snapped his fingers as if remembering something. “Oh—speaking of RAD WEEKEND. Ken’s daughter’s always saying she’ll surpass it too. Ever thought about teaming up with her?”

“An Shiraishi, huh,” Akito mused. A faint grin tugged at his lips. “She’s not bad.”

He shrugged. “I wouldn’t mind teaming up with her at all.”

Then, more seriously—

“So long as she’s got the talent… and the drive.”

“Should we go and recruit her, Akito?”

Akito didn’t hesitate.
“Yeah.”

Weekend Garage

The café felt smaller now—like the walls had leaned in to listen.

Kohane’s fingers twisted nervously around the hem of her skirt as An’s words settled in her chest.

“T-Team up…?” she echoed softly. “As in… you and me?”

An’s grin widened, bright and unrestrained. “Yeah! You felt it too, didn’t you? When we sang together just now.”

Kohane swallowed. Her heartbeat was still loud in her ears, still tangled with the echo of the music.

“I-I mean… maybe,” she said carefully. “But someone like me— I don’t think I’m good enough to team up with someone like you…”

An’s expression shifted—not angry, not disappointed—but firm.

“Kohane,” she said, stepping closer, voice steady, “don’t ever put yourself down like that.”

Kohane froze.

“I’ve been going to events and listening to singers since I was a kid,” An continued. “I’ve heard tons of talented people. But singing with you today?” She placed a hand over her chest. “That was the most exhilarated I’ve ever felt.”

Kohane’s eyes widened.

“You… felt that way listening to me?”

The words felt unreal on her tongue.

Her gaze dropped to the floor.

“I get really nervous in front of people,” she admitted, voice trembling. “I feel like I’d just slow you down… like I’d be an inconvenience. But…” She clenched her fists. “I wonder if I could change. Is it really okay for me to try?”

An didn’t even pause.

“Yeah! Let’s do it!” she said brightly. “And you’re welcome to be as much of an inconvenience as you want.”

“…What?” Kohane blinked.

An laughed. “That’s what a team is, isn’t it? Cooperating. Supporting each other. I’ll help you when you need it—just promise you’ll do the same for me.”

Kohane’s breath caught.

Her chest felt tight. Warm.

An leaned against the counter, eyes drifting toward the stage.

“My dad had someone like that,” she said. “Another musician he met here in town. They always had each other’s backs—fighting, laughing, singing together.”

Her voice softened. “Just before my dad retired, they put on an event called RAD WEEKEND.”

“RAD… WEEKEND?” Kohane repeated.

An nodded, eyes shining. “This street’s always been full of artists. But that event? It was different. They gathered the best musicians—the ones who really knew how to move a crowd. Different genres, same love for music.”

She clenched her fist, excitement bubbling over.

“It was so intense I could barely breathe. I thought my heart was going to explode.”

Kohane smiled faintly.

“That… sounds amazing.”

“I told my dad I wanted to make something like that someday,” An continued. “And he told me something I’ll never forget.”
She looked back at Kohane.

‘This event was only possible because of all the people I met who loved music as much as I did. There’s no way I could’ve done it alone.’

An's smile turned earnest. "That's my dream—to meet people like that, and with them, organize the greatest event in history."

Kohane lowered her gaze, fingers curling lightly against her skirt.

(An is so cool… She already has a dream. She knows what she wants and she's chasing it with everything she has.)
(She's nothing like me…)

And yet—

(He'll help me too.)

Yuu's words resurfaced in her mind, steady and unwavering.
I'll help you change.

Kohane closed her eyes.

The noise of the café dulled. Her fear, her doubts, the familiar urge to retreat—all of it pressed in at once. Then she inhaled, slowly, deliberately… and opened her eyes again.

An laughed softly, scratching the back of her head. "Haha… sorry, I kinda got carried away there. You don't have to answer right away, okay? If you want to give it a shot someday, just let me—"

"I want to try."

The words slipped out before Kohane could stop them.

An blinked. "What?"

Kohane straightened, heart hammering as she forced herself to meet An's eyes.
"I want to try doing an event like that. I want to try teaming up with you."

For a second, the café seemed to hold its breath.

"Really?" An asked, eyes widening. "You'll sing with me?"

"I—I don't know how much I can actually do," Kohane admitted, voice trembling but sincere. "But… I'll try my best."

An's face lit up instantly, like a spark catching fire.
"Great! Thanks, Kohane!"

Warmth spread through Kohane's chest—alongside the fear.

(What did I just do…? I said it out loud. I really said it.)
(I'm still scared… but the thought of singing with An again… it's exciting.)

The café bell rang.

"Oh!" An glanced toward the entrance. "Looks like we've got a customer. I'll be right back—welco—oh. Hey, Akito. Toya."

“Yo,” Akito said casually as he stepped inside. “Thought we’d stop by again.”

“Welcome!” An grinned. “Thanks for always coming by.”

“We’ll have the usual.” Akito’s sharp eyes shifted, landing on Kohane. “Huh? Don’t think I’ve seen you here before.”

Kohane stiffened.

(They look… kind of scary.)
(But if they’re An’s friends, they can’t be bad… right?)

“The name’s Akito Shinonome,” he said. “Nice to meet you. This here’s my buddy, Toya Aoyagi.”

“I-It’s very nice to meet you,” Kohane replied quickly, bowing slightly. “My name is Kohane Azusawa.”

“…No need to be so formal,” Toya said calmly.

“These two are freshmen with me at Kamiyama High,” An explained. “They’re also huge fans of my dad’s. They call themselves BAD DOGS. They do shows around here all the time.”

“We’ve been coming here since junior high,” Akito added.

“Junior high…?” Kohane’s eyes widened. “You mean you’ve been performing since then? That’s amazing!”

Akito laughed. “Just playing shows isn’t a big deal. Anyone can do it.”
Then he smirked at An. “Speaking of—have you finally found someone to sing with yet, Shiraishi? If you’re serious about surpassing RAD WEEKEND, you can’t do it alone forever.”

An’s grin turned sharp. “Your timing’s perfect. I actually found someone a few minutes ago.”

“…A few minutes ago?” Toya echoed.

Akito followed An’s gaze.
“…Her?”

“That’s right!” An said proudly. “Kohane’s my new partner. I knew it the moment we sang together.”

Akito raised an eyebrow. “Coming from you, that’s high praise. Where’ve you performed before, Azusawa?”

“Huh?” Kohane froze. “Oh—uh—I… I’ve never actually performed before. I’ve only ever sung in music class…”

Akito’s expression shifted instantly.

“…What?”

An’s eyes sparkled instead of dimming.
“No experience, and you can still sing like that? That’s incredible, Kohane!”

Akito fell silent.

"…Huh."

"I'm sure you'll get used to singing in front of people in no time," An continued confidently. "And once you do, I bet you'll be even better than Akito and Toya!"

Akito clicked his tongue—but then smiled.

"…In that case," he said slowly, "I've got an idea."

He leaned forward slightly.

"How would you two like to be part of an upcoming event?"

"…What?!"

Kohane's breath caught.

"A–An event?!"

"Yeah," Akito said easily, as if he weren't tossing her straight into the deep end. "Now that you're a group, why not? We should perform together—as artists with a shared vision." He glanced aside, thoughtful. "One of the performers for an event next month backed out. There's an open slot. It's at a live house called RED."

"RED…" An repeated, tilting her head. "It's kinda small, but that might actually be perfect for a first performance." She turned to Kohane, eyes bright. "What do you think? It's a great chance, and I really want people to hear us sing!"

"N–Next month…?" Kohane's voice wavered. The word felt far too close, like a deadline rushing toward her. "That's really soon… Will I be okay…?"

"You will," An said without hesitation. "We've got plenty of time to practice. And besides—I'll be right there with you."

Kohane paused.

(That's right… I wouldn't be alone.)

The tight knot in her chest loosened, just a little.

"I think…" she said carefully, "…I can handle that."

Akito gave a short nod. "Then it's settled. I'll let them know you're in."

"Okay!" An grinned. "Thanks for the invite, Akito."

"Don't mention it." His smile sharpened. "This'll be our first time performing at the same event. I'm looking forward to it."

Toya remained silent.

Kamiyama Street

The evening air was cool as Akito and Toya walked side by side, the glow of streetlights stretching long shadows across the pavement.

"…What was that about back there?" Toya asked at last. "Why invite them so suddenly?"

Akito scoffed. "Did you know I played soccer until junior high?"

Toya blinked. "Huh?"

"Before I knew it, I was the best on the team, Didn't even like it that much—but everyone's expectations made me think I wanted to go pro." He clicked his tongue. "Then I went up against a nationally ranked team."

He laughed, bitter and short.

"That's when I realized it. People who truly have their eyes on a goal? They're on a completely different level. They'll sacrifice everything—free time, meals, sleep—just to get there."

Toya listened quietly.

"Seeing RAD WEEKEND…" Akito's voice lowered. "That was the first time I found something worth sacrificing everything for. I always thought Shiraishi felt the same way. She was there too, after all."

He clenched his fist.

"But now she's teamed up with a total amateur."

Toya stopped walking.

"There's no way," Akito continued sharply, "she can surpass that night with some timid, half-hearted noob dragging her down."

"…Akito," Toya said slowly, "don't you think it's a bit early to decide they're doing this half-heartedly?"

"Were you even paying attention?" Akito snapped. "That kid said she's only ever sung in music class. Someone like that doesn't even deserve to say RAD WEEKEND's name."

He scoffed.
"Surpass that night? Don't make me laugh."

"…Hey."

A third voice cut through the air.

"Don't you think you're underestimating her a bit too much?"

Akito turned sharply. "Huh? Who're you?"

"Oh—right. Sorry," the boy said, tapping his smartwatch absently. "Forgot to introduce myself."

"Yuu Hazuki," Toya said, recognizing him instantly. "He's my classmate."

Akito glanced between them, eyes narrowing.

"…Huh?"

The streetlight flickered overhead, casting Yuu's calm expression into sharp relief as the tension quietly tightened.

Akito scoffed, hands jammed into his pockets.
"I'm just stating the obvious," he said flatly.

Yuu didn't answer right away.

Yuu's expression was calm—too calm—but his eyes were sharp, quietly assessing.

Then he turned his gaze from Akito to Toya.

"…Then," Yuu said, voice even, "want to make a bet?"

Akito frowned. "A bet?"

Toya blinked, surprised. "…A bet?"

Yuu nodded once. "Yeah. Since you're so sure."

Akito clicked his tongue. "Sure about what?"

"That Azusawa-san and Shiraishi-san don't have what it takes." Yuu met Akito's glare head-on.
"That they're half-hearted. That they'll never get anywhere near RAD WEEKEND."

The air felt heavier.

Akito's lips curled into a sharp grin. "And what exactly are you proposing?"

Yuu slipped his hands into his pockets, mirroring Akito's stance—but without the hostility.
"At the event. RED. Let the performances decide."

Toya's eyes widened slightly. "You mean—"

"If they crumble," Yuu continued, "if they freeze up, can't connect with the crowd, can't stand on the same stage as you two—then you win."

Akito folded his arms. "And if they don't?"

Yuu's gaze didn't waver.
"Then you admit you were wrong."

Silence stretched.

Akito laughed—short, sharp, almost mocking. "That's it? You're betting on a complete amateur against BAD DOGS?"

"Yes."

"…You've got guts," Akito said, eyes narrowing. "Or you're just stupid."

“Maybe,” Yuu replied calmly. “But I trust what I saw.”

Toya glanced between them, unease flickering across his face. “…Akito.”

Akito exhaled through his nose. “Fine.” He stepped closer, looming just slightly. “I’ll take that bet.”

A dangerous glint flashed in his eyes.

“When they realize how far out of their depth they are,” he added, “don’t come crying to us.”

Yuu smiled faintly—not cocky, not smug. Just certain.

“We’ll see.”

The bet was set.

Yuu didn’t respond right away.

He simply held Akito’s gaze for a moment longer—quiet, unreadable—before turning on his heel.

A slow nod followed, almost absentminded, as he walked past them and disappeared down the street, the fading city lights swallowing his silhouette.

“For some reason…” Akito muttered, clicking his tongue. “That guy feels really familiar.”

Toya exhaled softly. “Yeah. Like we’ve crossed paths before.”

Akito clenched his fist, eyes burning with certainty.
“But it doesn’t matter.”

He stopped walking and looked ahead, the memory of RAD WEEKEND flashing behind his eyes—heat, sound, devotion carved into his bones.

“Nothing’s going to change.”

His voice sharpened, resolute and unforgiving.

“We’ll crush them with our singing.”

Back to Kohane and An's perspective.

An leaned forward over the small café table, eyes bright with excitement, fingers tapping restlessly against the wood.
“Now that we’re officially doing this,” she said, grinning, “we should figure out what we’re going to sing.”

Kohane stiffened at the praise that followed.

“That was really great back there,” An continued without hesitation. “You handled the harder parts like it was nothing. You really are amazing, Kohane.”

“N–No, I’m not—” Kohane began, her voice shrinking instinctively, but An was already scrolling through a playlist on her phone.

“Still,” An said cheerfully, “it’s good to have options. Any other songs you like?”

Kohane hesitated, then pointed timidly.
“Um… what about this one? It’s by Miku.”

An’s eyes lit up. “Oh, this one’s cool! Yeah, let’s add it.”

Kohane nodded, relieved—until something strange caught her eye.

“…Huh?”

An glanced up. “What’s wrong?”

“There’s a song here without a title,” Kohane said softly. “It just says Untitled.”

An blinked. “That’s weird. Maybe it didn’t download properly? Try playing it.”

Kohane tapped the screen.

Nothing happened.

“I don’t hear anything,” she murmured. “Maybe it’s broken—”

The screen suddenly flared white.

“Kohane…?” An said slowly. “Is it just me, or is your phone glowing?”

“It is?” Kohane squinted—and then gasped. “Ah—! I can’t see!”

Light swallowed them whole.

When Kohane opened her eyes again, her breath caught.

“Wh–Whoa…” She stumbled slightly. “That scared me… W–What just happened?”

The café was gone.

They stood instead on a quiet street bathed in unfamiliar light, the air humming faintly—as if music itself lingered between the buildings.

“…Where are we?” An asked, scanning their surroundings. “We were just inside the cafe, right?”

“I—I’ll check the map,” Kohane said quickly, fumbling for her phone. Her hands shook.
“…It’s not working. What’s going on…?”

An exhaled, forcing a smile. “Let’s look around. Maybe we’ll find something familiar.”

Kohane nodded slowly. “I don’t recognize this place… but somehow, it feels like I’ve been here before.”

An paused. “You feel it too?”

She suddenly pointed ahead. “Look! That flyer—RAD WEEKEND! Dad said all of those disappeared after the event. Why is it here?”

Kohane’s heart skipped. “An… there’s a shop over there.”

A café stood quietly at the corner, warm light spilling from its windows.

“Let’s ask for directions,” An said. “Excuse me—! Is anyone here?”

The door creaked open.

“Welcome.”

A familiar voice greeted them.

“Oh… there you are,” she said with a gentle smile. “You’ve finally come to visit.”

Kohane froze.

“…M–Miku?”

Chapter 63: First Step

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

Kohane's breath caught in her throat.

"I–It's… Miku…"

The girl standing before them was unmistakable—long turquoise hair swaying gently, twin-tails catching the warm café light. She smiled softly, as if their arrival was something she had been waiting for all along.

An frowned, eyes darting between the café interior and the familiar-yet-impossible figure.
"Okay. What's going on here?"

Before Miku could answer, the bell above the café door chimed. Footsteps followed, confident and unhurried.

"Miku, I thought I saw someone outside on the street just now. Did you—oh?"

The woman who stepped in wore red, her presence lively and warm. She laughed when she noticed them.

"I see you've finally come to visit this SEKAI," MEIKO said, her smile widening. "I'm so glad."

"MEIKO's here too?!" Kohane blurted out, panic and disbelief mixing in her voice.

An crossed her arms, trying to ground herself.
"Okay, hold on. These are holograms or something, right? I mean, Miku and MEIKO are virtual singers."

"That's what I thought too," Kohane whispered, staring at them. "But if that were true… we should be able to see through them."

MEIKO chuckled. "Hehe. Looks like we surprised you." She gestured toward the tables. "Why don't we sit down and talk for a bit?"

"Good idea," Miku agreed, already turning toward the café interior.

Kohane hesitated, fingers curling into her sleeves. "A–An…"

An met her eyes, then shrugged with a determined smile.
"I don't get what's happening either, but they seem to know something. Let's hear them out."

And so, they followed.

The café interior was bathed in soft light, the air warm and comforting. Wooden tables, familiar décor—everything felt oddly nostalgic.

“This place…” Kohane murmured. “It’s wonderful. And somehow… I feel like I’ve been here before.”

“That’s because,” Miku said gently, “this is your SEKAI.”

“Our… SEKAI?” Kohane echoed. The word sent a ripple through her chest, tugging at a distant memory.

Then—

Let’s talk about this in your SEKAI.

Her eyes widened.
“…I remember.”

She turned sharply to Miku. “Are you the same Miku I met before?”

“And what exactly is a SEKAI?” An asked. “You keep saying it like we should already know.”

Miku nodded. “SEKAI is a place born from feelings. Strong feelings. You both have a powerful desire to fulfill a dream, don’t you? This place exists because of that.”

“Huh?!” An and Kohane said in unison.

“Our dreams?” An repeated. “Mine is to put on an event even more amazing than RAD WEEKEND… but how does that create a whole world?”

MEIKO smiled knowingly. “I get why it’s hard to believe. But you felt it, didn’t you? That sense of familiarity. Like you’d already walked these streets before.”

Kohane gasped softly.

“…Now that you mention it,” An said, snapping her fingers, “I saw a RAD WEEKEND flyer outside earlier. Dad said they all disappeared after the event.”

“So this place really is made from our feelings?”

MEIKO nodded. “Yep. And your world and this one are connected by a song—Untitled.”

“Untitled…” An repeated. “The one on Kohane’s phone.”

“When you play it, you come here,” MEIKO explained. “When you stop it, you return.”

Kohane swallowed. “Um… c-can I ask something?”

“Of course,” Miku said.

“…Is this place really made from both our feelings?”

MEIKO tilted her head. “Hmm?”

“You said it comes from a strong desire to fulfill a dream,” Kohane continued, voice trembling. “But unlike An… I don’t really know what my dream is.”

“Kohane…” An said quietly.

“I was thinking maybe… this SEKAI only exists because of An.”

Miku shook her head, smiling warmly.

“No. This SEKAI belongs to both of you. When you all discover your true feelings, we’ll turn them into a song.”

“A song…?” Kohane whispered.

“Yes,” Miku replied. “You have those feelings too, Kohane. Oh, and—”

Ding!

The café bell rang loudly.

“Miku! MEIKO!” an excited voice called out. “You’ll never believe what Rin did this time!”

Another voice followed, tired but fond.
“Yes, yes… I’ve heard that many times already. Don’t tell me—you’re going to tell them too?”

“They have to!”

A sigh.

“At this point… you two are always fighting.”

The atmosphere shifted—livelier, warmer.

“Miku! MEIKO! You won’t believe what Rin did this time!”

Another voice followed, weary but familiar. “Yes, yes… I’ve heard that story before. Don’t tell me—you’re going to drag them into it too?”

“They have to!”

“…At this point,” the voice sighed, “you two always fight.”

MEIKO turned toward the door, amused. “Oh dear. Did you and Rin get into another argument?” Then she smiled knowingly. “And… welcome back, Yuu.”

“H-Hazuki-kun?!” Kohane exclaimed.

An’s eyes widened. “That guy?!”

Len blinked. “Huh? We have guests?” He grinned brightly. “Oh! You must be Kohane and An! So you finally came!”

“Yes,” Miku said. “We were just explaining this SEKAI.”

“Nice to meet you!” Len said cheerfully. “I’m Len!”

Yuu cleared his throat. “I’m sure Azusawa-san already knows my name, but… I’m Yuu Hazuki. I’m not a Virtual Singer—just a visitor.”

An smiled brightly. “Nice to meet you! I’m An Shiraishi. We go to the same school, right? Kohane told me!”

“Yeah,” Yuu replied. “We do.”

Len tilted his head. “But… is it just the two of you?”

“Huh?” An blinked. “Yeah. Why?”

“That’s odd,” Len said. “I was sure this SEKAI was created from four people’s feelings.”

“Four?” Kohane echoed. “So… there are others?”

An’s eyes lit up. “That must mean there are more people who want to surpass RAD WEEKEND!” Then her expression shifted. “Oh—! The café!”

Len flinched. “What’s wrong?”

“I left it unattended!” An gasped. “I need to get back!”

“What?! Already?!” Len protested. “We barely talked!”

“That’s enough, Len,” MEIKO said firmly.

An laughed nervously. “I’ll come again! Thanks for today!” She held up her phone. “We just press stop on Untitled, right?”

A soft laugh slipped from Yuu’s lips as he glanced around the café.
“Haha… I was wondering why there wasn’t anyone at WEEKEND GARAGE when I stopped by.”

“You were there?!” An stiffened, eyes widening. “I—I’m sorry, Hazuki-kun!”

“It’s fine,” he replied easily, waving it off. His gaze shifted toward Kohane. “I came for Azusawa anyway.”

“…For me?” Kohane echoed, her voice barely above a whisper.

“That’s right.”

Her breath hitched. “Y-You too?! You’re leaving now?”

Len’s eyes immediately shimmered with protest as he leaned forward over the counter. “Stay for a bit! You just got here!”

Yuu stepped closer and, without hesitation, rested a hand atop Len’s head, ruffling his hair lightly. “Don’t worry,” he said softly. “I’ll come back.”

You promised?”

“Yeah,” Yuu smiled. “I promise.”

At that moment, An's phone flared with light, its screen flashing insistently.

"Oh!" Kohane jolted, clutching her own phone. "Th-Thank you so much for today!"

Miku's smile softened, her turquoise eyes warm and knowing.
"I hope you're able to discover your feelings soon, Kohane. When that happens, I'm sure they'll become a wonderful song."

"…Huh?" Kohane murmured, confusion and something deeper stirring in her chest.

Before she could ask more, the world blurred—light folding in on itself like a closing curtain.

And just like that, Kohane and An vanished from the café, returning to WEEKEND GARAGE, leaving only the lingering echo of their presence behind.

The café grew quiet.

"…Alright," Yuu said after a moment, turning toward the door. "I'll be heading out as well."

MEIKO sighed, resting her chin in her hand. "Looks like the timing was off. Still, I'm sure they'll come back."

She glanced at Yuu knowingly. "Maybe next time, they'll bring the other two as well… right?"

Yuu nodded. "Yeah."

Len suddenly straightened, eyes lighting up.
"Oh! I've got it! I'll go say hi to the other two myself!"

Miku blinked. "Len—"

"You went to see Kohane before, didn't you?" he said eagerly.

"…Yes," Miku answered.

"Then it's my turn!" Len grinned, already heading toward the exit. "I'm off!"

Back to Kohane's perspective.

The familiar warmth returned first.

The scent of coffee, the low hum of conversation, the faint creak of the café's wooden floorboards—Kohane blinked as the world settled back into place.

"…Oh."

They were back.

Weekend Garage stretched out before them exactly as it had been moments ago, sunlight filtering through the windows, dust motes floating lazily in the air. It was as if nothing strange had happened at all.

"Oh… we're back in the café!" Kohane breathed.

An laughed, still sounding a little breathless. “That was seriously wild. We just went on a crazy adventure, didn’t we?”

Before Kohane could answer, a familiar voice spoke from nearby.

“That was your SEKAI,” he said calmly. “It’s called Street SEKAI.”

Kohane startled.

Yuu Hazuki was sitting at one of the tables, posture relaxed, hands folded loosely as if he’d been there the entire time. For a second, Kohane wondered if she’d imagined him—just like everything else today.

“Ah—right! I totally forgot! What do you need, Hazuki-kun?”

“Coffee.”

“Coming right up!”

An disappeared behind the counter, leaving an awkward quiet in her wake.

Kohane glanced at the clock on the wall.

“Oh no—!” Her heart skipped. “It’s so late… I need to get home!”

“I guess it is,” An said, already grabbing her phone. “Thanks for hanging out today. I’ll message you later!”

As Kohane gathered her things, she felt a sudden hesitation—as if something unseen were tugging at her sleeve.

“Wait, Azusawa-san.”

“…Yes?”

“Can we talk?”

For a moment, Kohane’s nerves flared. But she nodded anyway.

An slipped them a curious glance before turning back to the counter, giving them space.

Yuu spoke softly. “I’m glad things are starting to change.”

Kohane tilted her head. “C-Change?”

“How was it?” he asked. “Being there.”

The images came rushing back—the glowing streets, the RAD WEEKEND flyers that shouldn’t exist, Miku’s voice, warm and knowing.

“…It felt strange,” Kohane admitted. “But also… familiar. Like I’d been there before, even though I know I hadn’t.”

Yuu smiled faintly.

“That’s how it starts.”

“I heard you joined Shiraishi-san’s group.”

“Y-Yes…!” Kohane stiffened. “H-How did you know?”

“I had a feeling.” His gaze sharpened just a little. “Then you’ll be performing at RAD WEEKEND.”

“H-Hazuki-kun—don’t tell me…” Her eyes widened. “You were listening?”

“Sorry.”

She shook her head, embarrassed but smiling faintly. “It’s okay. I was going to tell you anyway.”

“I’ll help you.”

“Eh?”

“I said it already,” Yuu continued evenly. “I’ll help you.”

Kohane’s hands clenched around the strap of her bag. “C-Can I really do it…?”

“It won’t be easy. But you can.”

Before she could respond, a cup slid gently onto the table.

“That’s right, Kohane!” An said brightly, setting the coffee in front of Yuu. “Your voice is actually beautiful, you know!”

Kohane’s face flushed. “A-An…!”

Yuu glanced at the cup, then smiled—just a little.
“Actually… to tell you the truth, I made a bet.”

“A bet?” Kohane blinked. “W-With who?”

“Shinonome Akito. And Aoyagi Toya.”

“Eh?! Seriously?!” Her voice cracked in shock. “W-What kind of bet?!”

Yuu leaned back, eyes glinting with quiet amusement.

“That’s a secret.”

The conversation lingered, drifting naturally from song choices to rhythms, from vocal techniques to the quiet thrill of standing on a stage. The café lights glowed warmly above them as time slipped by unnoticed, until the last drop of coffee disappeared from Yuu’s cup.

He stood and paid at the counter, the faint clink of coins marking the end of their impromptu gathering.

“Come on, Azusawa-san, “I’ll walk you home again.”

“Y-Yeah… thank you, Hazuki-kun,” Kohane replied, her voice small but sincere.

“Wait,” An called out just as Yuu turned toward the door.

He paused and looked back. “What is it?”

An pulled out her phone with an easy grin. “Can I get your LINE ID?”

“Huh?” Yuu blinked, then let out a quiet laugh. “Oh… sure.”

He took out his phone and unlocked the screen. A soft chime sounded—and immediately—

“Oh wow~!” An leaned in. “That wallpaper is adorable! Is that a hamster?”

Kohane peeked over as well, eyes widening slightly. “I-It’s really cute…”

“Haha… yeah,” Yuu said, scratching the back of his head, clearly embarrassed.

One quick scan. A soft confirmation beep.

“Alright~ Thank you, Hazuki-kun!” An said cheerfully.

“Yeah,” Yuu replied.

“Thank you,” Kohane added, bowing her head slightly. “Okay—see you later!”

The café door swung shut behind them, bells chiming faintly as Yuu and Kohane stepped out into the night together.

The street was quiet. Too quiet.

Their footsteps echoed against the pavement, the air between them filled with an almost tangible stillness.

“…Nervous?” Yuu asked at last, breaking the silence.

“Y-Yeah…” Kohane admitted, fingers tightening around her bag strap.

“One month,” he continued calmly. “One month of preparation. One month until the performance.”

He glanced at her, eyes steady and unreadable—yet unmistakably sincere.

“I’m looking forward to your singing.”

Kohane felt her cheeks warm at his words.

She stole a glance at Yuu—just for a second—before quickly lowering her gaze again. The streetlights stretched their shadows across the quiet sidewalk, the hum of the city softened by the late hour

“…Yeah,” she murmured.

The thought of it all—the stage, the crowd, the weight of expectation—made her heart flutter unsteadily. And yet, beneath the nerves, something else stirred. A fragile excitement. A feeling she

didn’t quite know how to name yet.

Yuu noticed the way her steps slowed, the way her shoulders tensed, and offered a faint, reassuring smile as they continued walking side by side into the glow of the night.

Kohane stopped just outside her front gate, the quiet of the neighborhood settling around her as the footsteps beside her faded away.

“Th-Thank you for walking me home, Hazuki-kun,” she said softly.

Yuu nodded once, hands in his pockets. “Get some rest.”

With that, he turned and disappeared down the street.

Kohane exhaled the breath she hadn’t realized she’d been holding.

“…Phew.”

She slipped inside, leaning back against the door as the events of the day rushed back all at once.

So much happened…

Weekend Garage.
Singing with An.
The invitation to perform.
That strange, glowing world—Street SEKAI—where Miku and MEIKO smiled like they’d known her forever… and Len’s bright laughter echoed through the café.

And then—

Hazuki-kun…

Her cheeks warmed at the thought, and she shook her head lightly, trying to chase the feeling away.

“Hahaha… my brain can’t keep up…”

Just then, her phone vibrated.

Notification

“Oh—An!”

An: Kohane, are you free after school tomorrow? Want to come to Vivid Street to practice?

Kohane’s fingers hovered for only a second before she typed back.

Kohane: Sure, I’ll be there.

A small smile tugged at her lips.

I’m really glad… I worked up the courage to go.

The next day — Vivid Street

“Kohane! Sorry to keep you waiting!”

An’s voice cut through the bustle of the street as she jogged over, waving enthusiastically.

“It’s okay,” Kohane replied. “I just got here.”

“Great! Come on—this way!” An said, already leading the way forward. “I’ve got a special place I like to practice.”

They wove through the colorful streets, music bleeding out from storefronts and laughter filling the air.

“Oh, An!” called out a clothing store manager. “Rumor has it you finally found a singing partner.”

An grinned proudly. “Yep! We’re gonna do our best!”

“Looking forward to the next event!” a DJ added from across the street.

“Thanks! I’ll see you there!” An replied without missing a beat.

Kohane watched her in quiet awe.

(She really is amazing… She knows everyone. And she’s so determined to chase her dream.)

Eventually, An stopped at a street corner where the crowd naturally gathered—people lingering, chatting, listening.

“All right,” An said, turning back to her. “Here we are. Let’s get started.”

Kohane blinked. “B-But… this is just a street corner.”

“Exactly,” An replied brightly. “There’s always a crowd here. Lots of people will hear us.”

“W-What?! We’re singing here?!”

“We’ll sing the list from yesterday. A cappella,” An said casually. “I’ll start us off—join in whenever you’re ready!”

Before Kohane could protest, An took a breath—

And began to sing.

The sound rang out into the open street, confident and alive, drawing eyes and ears almost instantly.

Kohane’s heart pounded.

I… can do this.

Chapter End Notes

As the clock strikes midnight and we step into a brand new year, I want to take a moment to thank all of you who've followed Beyond the Stage—whether from the very first chapter or somewhere along the way.

Your kudos, comments, and quiet support mean more than words can express.

I'll keep doing my best to tell this story with the care and heart it deserves.

So before I celebrate my New Year's with my family...

✨ Wishing you all an advanced, very Happy New Year! ✨

Chapter 64: Tomorrow

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

— Changing to Toya Aoyagi's perspective —

Toya had been walking with to his destination when the sound reached him.

A voice—clear, unfiltered, cutting through the usual noise of Vivid Street.

He slowed, then stopped.

It wasn't amplified. No speakers, no backing track. Just raw sound, carried by the air and pulled forward by curiosity. Toya followed it instinctively, weaving past pedestrians until the crowd thickened ahead of him.

A small circle had formed.

At its center—

"…Is that Shiraishi… and Azusawa?"

An stood confidently at the front, posture loose but grounded, her voice ringing out with familiar fire. Beside her, Kohane sang a beat behind—still hesitant, still finding her footing—but there was something different this time. Her voice didn't vanish into the street. It reached.

Passersby slowed. Some stopped outright.

"Hey, look!" someone murmured nearby.
"There's a couple girls singing over there!"

Toya watched in silence, arms at his sides, chest tightening with a feeling he hadn't let surface in a long time.

…Yeah.

We used to be like that, too.

Street performances. No stage. No guarantees. Just conviction and sound.

"Aoyagi-kun."

The voice came from behind him.

Toya stiffened slightly before turning.

"H—Hazuki-kun," he said, surprise flickering across his face. "I expected you here."

Yuu stood a short distance away, hands in his pockets, gaze angled toward the singers rather than Toya.

His expression was calm—almost knowing.

“Oh?” Yuu replied. “How so?”

Toya glanced back at the crowd, at Kohane’s trembling but persistent voice.

“…You’re looking after Azusawa-san, aren’t you?”

A faint smile tugged at Yuu’s lips.

“Bingo.”

Toya’s gaze returned to Kohane. She hesitated before her next line, took a breath—and sang. The sound wasn’t perfect, but it was earnest.

Determined.

“…Are you really certain Azusawa-san will change?” Toya asked quietly. “What you’re doing—aren’t you forcing her?”

“I’m not forcing her, I’m supporting her.”

Toya frowned. “This is support?”

“This,” Yuu said, nodding toward the street corner, the crowd, the unfiltered air between voices, “is just a first step.”

He closed his eyes briefly, then opened them again, gaze steady.

“Azusawa-san wouldn’t say ‘I want to change’ half-heartedly.”

The words struck something deep.

Half-heartedly.

Toya’s thoughts drifted—back to Akito’s voice, sharp and unwavering.

You don’t say you’re going to surpass RAD WEEKEND half-heartedly.

“…Half-heartedly, huh,” Toya murmured.

He turned away from the scene, the singing fading behind him as he walked toward the live house.

“See you in a month, Aoyagi-kun,” Yuu called after him.

Toya didn’t reply.

Live House

The familiar smell of cables and dust greeted him as he stepped inside.

“Right on time, Toya,” Akito said, rolling his shoulders. “You ready?”

“Yeah,” Toya answered. “I’m ready.”

“All right,” Akito grinned. “Let’s do it.”

As they prepared, Toya spoke up. “You already know this, but don’t rush into the second song.”

Akito scoffed lightly. “No need to remind me. Today’s show will be flawless.”

His expression sharpened.

“If we want to surpass that night, we’ve got to overwhelm everyone with our music. And there’s no way we’re losing to that half-baked pair.”

He clapped a hand on Toya’s shoulder. “I’m counting on you, bud.”

Footsteps echoed nearby as staff moved around them.

“Toya—” Akito began.

“…Akito, I—”

The words caught in Toya’s throat.

(Never mind.)

The lights dimmed.

And the music began.

Cheers thundered through the live house, a dense wall of sound that pressed against the stage lights and rattled the speakers.

Akito and Toya stood shoulder to shoulder beneath the glare, breath syncing with the pulse of the crowd.

Their voices cut through the noise—
raw power and razor-clean precision intertwining as the song surged forward.

♪——!

Akito’s voice burned hot and fearless, dragging the audience along with sheer force alone. Toya’s followed like a blade—controlled, deliberate, each note placed with care. Together, they were overwhelming. When the final note rang out, the crowd erupted, applause crashing down in waves.

— Backstage —

The air backstage buzzed with lingering adrenaline and muffled cheers bleeding through the walls.

“BAD DOGS were insane again tonight!” a spectator laughed, barely containing their excitement. “Seriously, they’re still in high school?!”

“Akito’s power just pulls you in,” another replied. “And Toya—man, his technique’s unreal. There’s something mysterious about him too. I don’t think any of the younger groups around here can even compete.”

“What about Ken’s daughter?” someone chimed in.

“Oh—right! Yeah, her too. Man, what a time to be alive.”

A sharp click of a tongue cut through the chatter.

“Tch. Don’t those people have anything better to talk about?"

Akito turned, eyebrow raised. “What’s your problem? Why’re you so pissed?”

The musician leaned against the wall, arms crossed, eyes narrowed. “It’s nothing. I’m just tired of everyone bringing up Ken’s daughter like she’s the second coming.”

Toya stiffened slightly. “Shiraishi…?”

“Yeah. That reminds me,” the musician continued, smirking. “I heard you two are performing in some event soon. Must be annoying, getting compared to a girl riding her father’s coattails.”

Toya opened his mouth. “No, that event is—”

“Actually,” Akito cut in, a grin spreading across his face, sharp and confident, “I’m looking forward to it.”

The musician blinked. “Huh?”

“We’re going to crush them with our singing.”

“Crush them?” The man laughed, eyes lighting up. “Seriously?! That’s great. Ken’s girl won’t stand a chance—she’ll look like a snot-nosed brat next to you two. Hell, maybe I’ll even give you guys a little support.”

Toya frowned. “Support…?”

Akito’s smile vanished. “Hey. Don’t stick your nose where it doesn’t belong. This is our problem.”

“Oh, relax,” the musician said lightly, waving a hand. “I won’t do anything… too bad.”

Silence settled between them.

Meanwhile—somewhere else entirely.

Len blinked as darkness swallowed his vision.

“Huh…? It’s pitch black,” he muttered. “And… am I shaking? Did I end up in a bag or something?”

Muffled voices reached his ears.

“Would you like the equipment moved over here?” Akito’s voice asked.

“Yeah. Thanks for the help, Akito, Toya,” a staff member replied.

Len’s eyes widened. “Akito… Toya…! Those are the other two!”

He smiled faintly despite himself. “So they really are nearby…”

But the hurried footsteps, the clatter of equipment, the tension in the air—it all told him the same thing.

“They look busy today,” Len murmured. “Maybe… I’ll come back another time.”

And with that thought, the presence faded—quietly retreating, just out of sight.

“Akito,” Toya said quietly, breaking the silence as they prepared to leave, “I’m gonna go now.”

Akito glanced over his shoulder. “Huh?”

But Toya was already walking away, his footsteps fading into the corridor.

— One Month Later —
Weekend Garage

The late afternoon light slanted through the café windows, painting the familiar space in warm gold.

An leaned against the counter, grinning like she could barely keep the excitement contained.
“The big show is tomorrow!” she said brightly. “Are you ready, Kohane?”

Kohane clasped her hands together, nodding despite the flutter in her chest.
“Yeah. Thanks to you… I’ve been able to practice singing in front of people a lot more. I-I think I’m ready.”

An laughed softly, the sound full of confidence.
“I’ve explained how the event works, and we’ve done everything we can. Tomorrow, we just give it our best.”

“Right,” Kohane said, her voice firmer than it used to be. “I’ll do my best.”

Later — Vivid Street

Night had fallen, and neon lights reflected off the pavement in scattered colors. Vivid Street buzzed with energy as always—music leaking from storefronts, voices overlapping, laughter echoing down alleyways.

Kohane walked slowly, hands clenched at her sides.

I said I’d be fine, she told herself, but I’m still really nervous…
Her mind filled with images of the event—crowds, piercing gazes, people who looked like they’d tear her apart with a single comment.

(But An’s been with me every step of the way… and Hazuki-kun, too.)

She exhaled—then stopped.

“Huh…?”

Up ahead stood a familiar figure, posture calm and composed.

“Oh,” he said when he noticed her. “It was Azusawa, wasn’t it?”

“That’s right,” Kohane replied quickly. “Um—your name was Aoyagi, right? Are you on your way to Weekend Garage?”

Toya shook his head.
“No. I was heading to a nearby park to practice. And… there’s no need to be so formal.”

“Oh… r-right,” Kohane said, nodding. “Um, is it just you today?”

“Yeah.” His gaze drifted somewhere distant. “This is something I do alone. My singing still isn’t as good as Akito’s when it comes to drawing in a crowd.”

“I see…”

For a moment, the noise of the street filled the silence between them.

Then Toya spoke again.

“Azusawa… may I ask you something?”

“Huh? Oh—sure.”

He turned to face her fully, his expression serious, unwavering.

“Are you truly serious about holding an event that surpasses RAD WEEKEND?”

Kohane froze.

“…What?”

“Please,” Toya said quietly. “Tell me.”

Kohane swallowed.

“I guess…” Her fingers curled into the hem of her jacket. “I want to be serious about it.”

She hesitated, words tangling together as nervousness bubbled up again. “I only learned about RAD WEEKEND recently, so I know it probably sounds strange coming from me. You might think I don’t really understand what it means.”

Toya said nothing. He simply waited.

That silence gave her courage.

“The first time I went to Vivid Street…” Kohane continued, her voice softening, “…I was scared. Really scared. Even just walking there felt overwhelming. But then I saw An singing.”

Her chest tightened at the memory.

“My heart started racing. And when we sang together for the first time, it was even louder—like it might burst out of my chest. I remember thinking…” She smiled faintly, eyes lowering. “I never knew something could feel that fun.”

She shook her head slightly, embarrassed but determined.

“I’ve never really had a dream of my own. Not like An does. But now… I want to sing with her. I want to chase after that dream together.”

The words came easier now, steadier.

“I know I still have a long way to go. I’m not confident, and I get scared all the time.” She looked up at him again, her eyes shining with quiet resolve. “But working toward something with her—putting my whole heart into it—it makes me really happy.”

She took a breath.

“And… I want to change.”

For a moment, Toya simply watched her.

“I see,” he said at last.

Relief washed through Kohane, and she bowed her head slightly before remembering something else.

“Oh—and, um… thank you. For inviting us to the event.”

Toya blinked. “Hm?”

“If you hadn’t invited us,” she said honestly, “I think I would’ve been too scared to try something like this at all. So… tomorrow, I’m going to give it everything I have.”

The wind rustled faintly between them, carrying the distant echo of music.

Toya nodded once.

“…Right.”

“Ah—A-Anyway! I'm gonna go now! Someone's waiting for me!"

She bowed once more, deeply this time, then turned and hurried down the street, her footsteps light but hurried.

Toya watched her go, the echo of her words lingering long after she disappeared from view.

I want to change.

He let out a slow breath.

Kohane quickened her pace, the lingering warmth of the conversation still fluttering in her chest.

I should hurry up my pace, she thought, nerves finally catching up to her now that everything was quiet again.

Lost in her thoughts, she didn’t notice the figure stepping into her path until—

Thump.

“Ah—! S-Sorry!” Kohane blurted out, stumbling back a step and bowing instinctively.

“Huh? It’s alright,” the stranger replied.

She nodded quickly, heart pounding, and moved to pass him—only for the silence behind her to stretch just a second too long.

“…Wait.”

Kohane froze.

“Y-Yes?” She turned back, shoulders stiff, fingers curling into the hem of her jacket.

The man studied her for a moment, eyes lingering in a way that made her instinctively shrink inward. The air suddenly felt heavier, her earlier courage wavering.

“Can I get your number?” he asked casually. “You’re pretty cute.”

Her breath caught.

“E–Eh…? U-Um…” Kohane’s mind scrambled, words tangling in her throat as heat rushed to her face. She took a small step back without realizing it, heart hammering loud enough that she was sure he could hear it.

Wh-What do I do…?

Kohane hesitated, the silence stretching just long enough to make her chest tighten.

Her thoughts spiraled—Say something. Anything.

But the words wouldn’t come.

“I—I’m sorry,” she finally managed, her voice small, barely holding together. “I… I have to go.”

She stepped to the side, trying to pass him.

The stranger shifted—not enough to block her outright, but enough that her path felt uncertain. Too close. Too intentional.

“Hey, I’m not asking for much,” he said lightly, as if it were all a joke. “Just your number.”

Her fingers trembled around the strap of her bag.

Then—

“Azusawa-san. I’m here now.”

The voice came from behind her.

Calm. Steady. Familiar.

Kohane’s breath hitched as she turned. “H-Hazuki-kun…?”

Yuu was already walking toward her. Not hurried—just certain. He reached out and took her hand, his grip firm but gentle, grounding her before she even realized how badly she needed it.

The stranger clicked his tongue. “Who’re you supposed to be?”

Yuu stopped beside Kohane.

He didn’t step in front of her. Didn’t posture or loom. He simply stood close enough that she wasn’t alone anymore. She could feel the warmth of his presence, steady as a heartbeat.

He glanced down at her.

“You okay?” he asked quietly.

Kohane nodded, relief washing over her so suddenly it almost made her dizzy.

Yuu looked back at the stranger. “She said she’s leaving.”

The man scoffed. “Relax. I was just talking.”

“Then the conversation’s over,” Yuu replied.

His voice didn’t rise. There was no anger in it—no challenge. Just certainty.

For a moment, the stranger seemed to weigh his options.

Yuu didn’t move.

Didn’t blink.

Didn’t let go of Kohane’s hand.

“…Tch.” The man clicked his tongue again, waving them off. “Whatever.”

He turned away, footsteps fading into the noise of the street as if he’d never mattered at all.

The moment he was gone, Kohane let out a shaky breath she hadn’t realized she’d been holding.

“Th-Thank you…” she murmured, clutching her bag tighter. “I didn’t know what to say…”

Yuu looked at her for a moment, then gave a small nod.
“You don’t have to.”

She blinked, surprised, and looked up at him.

“You don’t owe anyone an answer,” he continued. “Especially not when you’re uncomfortable.”

Warmth crept into her cheeks—not embarrassment this time, but something softer. Safer.

“…I’m glad you were here,” Kohane admitted.

Yuu exhaled quietly, gaze shifting away just a little.

“Plus,” he added, “it’s my fault for being late.”

“Shall we go now?”

Kohane nodded, her grip tightening just a little before she followed him forward.

Together, they headed toward the mall, the noise of the city slowly giving way to the brighter hum of evening crowds and music spilling from open storefronts.

— Mall —

Lights reflected off polished floors, voices overlapping in a constant, lively murmur. Kohane glanced around, feeling both overwhelmed and oddly excited.

“Now then,” Yuu said, scanning the stores with a thoughtful look. “We’re gonna need to buy you some streetwear. And shoes, too. I think I know where to go.”

“U-Um… Hazuki-kun…”

He turned to her. “Yes?”

She hesitated, cheeks warming as she gestured slightly downward.

“Your hand…”

Yuu froze.

He looked down.

Then, realization hit.

“…Ah.”

He released her hand immediately, taking a small step back as if afraid he’d crossed a line. “S-Sorry.”

Kohane shook her head quickly. “N-No, it’s okay! I just—um—”

Her voice trailed off, flustered.

An awkward silence settled between them, filled with passing footsteps and distant laughter. Then —

“…Let’s go,” Yuu said, clearing his throat and pointing ahead, pretending very hard to be interested in a nearby shop window.

With that, they headed into a streetwear store tucked between two brightly lit cafés.

The moment they stepped inside, Kohane felt it—the shift in atmosphere.

The music was louder here, bass thrumming softly through the floor, mannequins dressed in bold layers and oversized silhouettes lining the walls. Everything felt… confident.

“Now then…” Yuu murmured, hands slipping into his pockets as he surveyed the racks. “Since this is your first rodeo…”

He stopped, as if reconsidering his words, then glanced at her.

“Azusawa-san,” he added gently, “feel free to look around as well.”

Kohane blinked, then nodded.

“Y-Yeah…!”

She took a tentative step forward, fingers brushing the edge of a hoodie’s sleeve.

The fabric was thicker than she expected.

Kohane lingered near a rack of jackets, her fingers brushing lightly against the hems as she moved from one to the next. Most of them felt too bold for her—sharp colors, oversized logos that demanded attention—but this time, she didn’t recoil. She let herself linger. Let herself look.

“…This one’s cool.”

The words slipped out before she could stop them.

She froze instantly, heat rushing to her cheeks, and turned halfway as if unsure whether she’d really said it aloud. Yuu, a few steps away and crouched near a display of shoes, looked up at once.

“Which one?” he asked.

Kohane hesitated, then slowly lifted the sleeve she’d been holding, as though asking permission just by showing it.

Yuu studied the jacket for a moment—quiet, thoughtful.

“…Yeah,” he said at last. “That suits you.”

Her shoulders loosened before she even realized they’d been tense.
“R-Really…?”

“Mm.” He nodded once. “It doesn’t try too hard. But it doesn’t hide, either.”

Something about that made her heart flutter.

She slipped the jacket on, movements careful, almost reverent. The fabric was heavier than she expected, settling around her shoulders with a comforting weight. She tugged the sleeves down, then lifted her gaze to the mirror.

The girl staring back at her felt unfamiliar.

Not different—but… braver.

“C-Can I try it out?” she asked quietly.

“Sure,” Yuu replied. “After we find shoes that match it.”

“I…” Kohane clenched the fabric lightly at her side. “I’ve never worn anything like this before.”

“That’s fine,” he said, voice steady. “First times are allowed.”

She let out a small, breathy laugh. “You make it sound so simple.”

“Because it is, you don’t have to change all at once. Just enough to take one step.”

Kohane looked back at her reflection and nodded.

“By the way, Hazuki-kun…” Kohane glanced around the store, her voice gentle but curious. “You seem really familiar with this place. Have you been here before?”

Yuu paused.

For just a moment, the noise of the store—the chatter, the music, the shuffle of footsteps—seemed to fade behind him. His gaze drifted somewhere distant, unfocused, as if he’d brushed against a memory he hadn’t meant to touch.

“…Yeah,” he said at last, a faint smile forming.

There was something quiet about it.

Kohane noticed, but before she could ask anything more, Yuu gave a small shake of his head, as though clearing the thought away.

“Oh—hey.” His tone lightened as he turned toward a nearby display. “I think I found something.”

He lifted a pair of shoes, simple but stylish, colors that matched the jacket almost perfectly.

“These should go well with the outfit,” he said, holding them out to her. “Alright—try them on.”

Kohane accepted them carefully, her curiosity lingering—but for now, she let it rest.

— After That —

By the time they stepped out of the store, the sky had begun to sink into evening.

The last traces of daylight spilled between the buildings in soft bands of amber and blue, brushing the city in a quiet glow. Behind them, the mall’s glass doors slid shut with a gentle hiss, sealing away the warmth, music, and chatter they’d left behind.

Kohane adjusted the shopping bag in her hands. It was heavier than she expected—not burdensome, but solid. Real.

“…It feels strange,” she murmured, eyes drifting to the edge of the bag where the new shoes peeked out. “Like I’m holding proof that today really happened.”

Yuu walked beside her, unhurried, his footsteps matching her pace without effort.

“That’s because it did,” he replied simply.

The words settled into her chest, and she smiled—small, but sincere.

One by one, the streetlights flickered on, their pale glow stretching across the pavement like guiding lines. For a while, neither of them spoke. The silence wasn’t uncomfortable. It felt intentional—like the pause before a song began, when the world holds its breath.

Kohane's thoughts drifted forward.

Tomorrow.

The event.

The stage.

The crowd.

The nervous flutter was still there, tight and restless in her chest—but it no longer threatened to swallow her whole.

She tightened her grip on the bag and took another step.

This time, without hesitation.

Still, one question lingered. One she knew she'd regret not asking.

"H-Hazuki-kun?"

He turned his head slightly. "Yeah?"

She hesitated, then gathered her courage.

"…Will you be there tomorrow?"

For a brief moment, he said nothing.

Then Yuu smiled—just a little.

"Of course," he said. "I wouldn't miss it."

She smiled back.

By then, Yuu only walked Kohane as far as her street.

The houses were quiet, porch lights glowing softly in the dusk. When she reached her gate, she turned, waved once more, and disappeared inside.

Yuu remained where he was.

He watched until the door closed.

Only then did he turn away.

— Switching to Yuu's Perspective —

The street was still. Too still.

Yuu exhaled slowly and lifted his wrist.

"Miku."

The surface of his smartwatch flickered. Light fractured, stuttering for a brief second before stabilizing into the familiar silhouette—cyan hair glitching at the edges, her form shimmering like a signal caught between worlds.

“Yes, Yuu?”

“There’s going to be chaos tomorrow,” he said quietly. “At the performance.”

Miku tilted her head, listening.

“So far, nothing has changed, except one thing.”

The image of Kohane’s tense expression flickered through his mind.

The stranger.

The hesitation.

The fear she hadn’t voiced.

“Kohane getting approached by people like that,” he said. “That wasn’t in the game’s script.”

Miku’s expression softened—but her eyes sharpened with understanding.

“…Do you want me to stand by?” she asked. “In case things diverge further?”

Yuu didn’t answer right away.

The streetlights hummed overhead.

Somewhere in the distance, a train passed, its sound stretching thin through the night.

“Yeah,” he said at last. “That’d be better.”

Miku smiled, small and knowing, her form flickering faintly as if the world itself acknowledged the uncertainty ahead.

“Hehe… alright,” she said. “See you tomorrow.”

Yuu lowered his arm, the hologram dissolving into static and light.

“Yeah,” he murmured to the empty street.

See you tomorrow.

Above him, the sky darkened, quiet, patient, waiting for the stage lights to rise.

Chapter End Notes

Wait, a hint in bold?! That phrase reminds me of something... Ahh, I remember now... [Amphoreus].

Chapter 65: When Courage Hesitated

— The Day of the Event —

— Kamiyama Street —

Crowds spilled across the street, voices overlapping in excited waves. The glow of the live house sign pulsed faintly against the evening sky, promising music loud enough to drown out doubt.

“Kohane! Over here!”

An waved from near the entrance, her voice bright and unmistakable. Kohane hurried toward her, fingers instinctively tugging at the hem of her jacket.

“Oh—hey, you got some new clothes!” An’s eyes lit up. “They look great on you!”

Kohane stiffened slightly. “I, um… I didn’t really know what I was looking for, so I had someone help me pick them out.” She hesitated, then asked softly, “D-Do I look all right?”

An’s smile turned playful.
“So that someone… was it Hazuki-kun?”

Kohane nodded, cheeks warming.

“Hehe. Yeah, I thought so.” An tilted her head, appraising her. “It really suits you. Oh! Maybe next time you could try contacts?”

“C-Contacts?” Kohane winced faintly. “P-Putting something in my eyes is a little scary… but maybe… I’ll give it a try.”

Before An could tease her further, a familiar voice cut in.

“So you guys made it.”

Akito stood nearby, hands in his pockets, eyes sharp as ever. “If you want, you can use the green room in the back.”

“Gotcha. Thanks, Akito,” An replied easily.

Kohane swallowed, then bowed slightly. “U-Um… I-I’m looking forward to tonight!”

Akito blinked, then smirked faintly. “Same here. I know you’re probably nervous—first time and all—but good luck.”

With that, An guided Kohane toward the back entrance, their voices fading as the door swung shut behind them.

— Switching Perspective: Akito & Toya —

From the side corridor, their voices carried faintly through the walls.

“Hehe. Kohane, you sound a bit nervous,” An laughed.

“W-Well, yeah…” Kohane admitted. “Just look at how many customers there are out front…”

Akito scoffed, folding his arms. “Look at ’em. Laughing like fools.” His eyes hardened. “Let’s go, Toya. It’s time to crush them.”

Toya didn’t move.

“Akito,” he said quietly, “do you have a minute?”

Akito glanced over. “Hm?”

“I feel like those two are just as serious about surpassing that event as we are.”

Akito’s brow furrowed. “Where’d this come from?”

Toya met his gaze evenly. “Why don’t we wait until after hearing them sing before passing judgment? There’s no hurry.”

Silence stretched between them.

Akito clicked his tongue.
“…..Fine. Whatever.” He looked away. “Just this once. If you really insist, then I’ll listen to them seriously.”

Toya exhaled, relieved. “…Got it. Thanks, Akito.”

Before they could move, another voice chimed in—loud, grating.

“Hey! Akito! Toya!”

The older musician grinned, leaning against the wall. “Make sure you give those two a good thrashing tonight!”

Akito’s eyes narrowed. “Oh. It’s you.” He shrugged. “That’ll depend on how they perform. Anyway—we’ll see you inside.”

The musician laughed under his breath.

“There’ll be no more riding her father’s coattails after tonight. Going up against the BAD DOGS? I can’t wait to see her get shown up in front of an audience.” He cracked his knuckles. “Alright—time to get ready to lend my support.”

As he walked off, Toya remained where he was for a moment longer.

Somewhere beyond the walls, the crowd roared louder.

And on the other side of the door, two girls steadied their breathing—about to step onto the same stage, chasing the same impossible night.

— Switching Perspective: Kohane & An —

— Live House —

The air inside the live house felt thick—hot with bodies, sound, and anticipation. Lights flared overhead, washing the stage in white and gold.

(Th-This is… a real event stage…)

Kohane's fingers trembled as she curled them into her sleeves.

(And I'm really going to stand up there…)

An noticed immediately. She stepped closer, lowering her voice.

"It's all right, Kohane. Take a deep breath." She smiled, steady and reassuring. "All we've got to do is be ourselves. Sing the way we want to sing. For today—just enjoy it, okay?"

"Y-Yeah!" Kohane nodded, forcing air into her lungs.

Then—

"Next up is the Vivids!"

The MC's voice boomed across the venue.

"They only just recently teamed up, but get this—one of them is the daughter of the famous Ken! You won't want to miss this!"

The crowd erupted.

"All right! It's Ken's daughter!"
"This'll be my first time hearing her!"

The cheers crashed over Kohane like a wave.

An turned to her. "Kohane—we're up."

"…Yeah."

The stage lights flared brighter as they stepped forward.

(S-So much energy…)

Kohane's heart pounded violently.

(An said this was a small venue… but it feels huge…)

Her eyes instinctively scanned the crowd.

(But… I don't see Hazuki-kun…)

An glanced at her, eyes sharp but kind. (Let's do this, Kohane.)

Kohane inhaled.

(Oh—! That was the signal!)

An’s voice rang out first.

♪——!

The crowd roared louder.

“Nice! She really is Ken’s daughter!”

“That song’s hard—but she’s killing it!”

An’s confidence filled the stage, her voice unwavering.

——♪ ——♪

(My part is coming up…)

Kohane clenched her fists. (I’ll be all right. Just calm down… believe in yourself…)

Somewhere behind the scenes—

“Hehe… I believe it was this cable.”

A careless tug.

“Whoopsie.”

Kohane sang.

♪~ ~

(My voice didn’t crack! I can do this!)

Then—

SCREEECH.

The microphone shrieked.

The music cut dead.

Kohane’s breath caught. (Huh…? The music—)

(It stopped?!) An’s eyes widened.

Hurried footsteps echoed backstage.

Murmurs rippled through the crowd.

“Hey—what gives?”

“Something wrong with the sound system?”

(Wh-What do we do?!)

Kohane froze. (The music stopped… the mics aren't working…)

(This is bad.)
An's jaw tightened. (If we don't do something, the mood will die. Is Kohane okay…?)

She looked over.

Kohane stood stiff, eyes unfocused.

(She's letting the atmosphere swallow her…)

An swallowed.
(I can't blame her. It's her first event.)

Her expression hardened with resolve.

(All the more reason I can't let this fall apart. If we're going to surpass RAD WEEKEND together, we can't stumble here.)

An stepped forward.

♪——!

Her voice rang out—clear, raw, unaccompanied.

The crowd stirred.

"They're… singing without the music?!"

"Man—Ken's daughter doesn't hesitate at all!"

Cheers broke out again.

Kohane's eyes snapped toward An.

(I—I have to sing too!)

(It'll be fine. I've practiced a cappella before… in front of people…)

She opened her mouth.

…..!

No sound came.

(Why…?)

Her chest tightened.

(Why can't I sing? Is it because I'm nervous…? W-What do I do…?)

Her vision blurred.

Kohane squeezed her eyes shut, tears threatening to spill—

—when everything stopped.

The cheers vanished.

The lights froze.

The air fell silent.

Kohane opened her eyes.

The live house was gone.

No crowd. No stage.

Only her.

And standing where the audience had been—

Another Kohane.

Her posture slouched. Her eyes dull. Her expression mild—gloomy—cold.

It stared straight at her.

(You will never change.)

Kohane's breath hitched.

(You never had the courage to sing.)

Her eyes widened.

She swallowed—and nodded weakly.

(That's right…)

(What am I even thinking?)

(In the end… it's all just me…)

The gloomy Kohane didn't move.
Didn't speak.
Just watched her—silent, certain.

The weight in Kohane's chest pressed down harder.

Then—

"…hane!!"

(Huh?)

The voice was faint.

Distant.

Like it was forcing its way through water.

“Ko…hane!!!”

(That voice…)

It wasn’t cold.

It wasn’t accusing.

It was urgent.

“KOHANE!!!”

The world shattered.

Sound crashed back in all at once—cheers, murmurs, the echo of the venue.

The frozen lights snapped back into motion, flooding the stage with heat and color.

Kohane gasped and opened her eyes.

She stood on the stage again.

The crowd filled the room.

And then—she saw him.

One figure near the front, standing out not because he was loud—but because he wasn’t smiling.

His posture was straight, eyes sharp, unwavering.

Yuu Hazuki.

He cupped his hands around his mouth and shouted with everything he had.

“KOHANE AZUSAWA!!”

Her breath caught.

“SING!!”

The word slammed into her chest—heavy, absolute.

Not a request.

Not encouragement.

A command.

The gloomy Kohane behind her wavered.

(…What are you waiting for?)

Kohane’s hands trembled.

She remembered the jacket.

The shoes.

The warmth on her shoulders.

First times are allowed.

Her throat burned.

She inhaled.

Deep.

The air didn’t feel so heavy anymore.

She opened her mouth—

—and sang.

“Oh?”

A voice rose from the crowd—curious, surprised.

“The other girl started singing as well!”

Murmurs rippled through the audience like a sudden breeze.

“Wait… she wasn’t the one singing earlier, right?”

“Isn’t she the shy one?”

“But—listen to her.”

Kohane’s voice trembled at first, thin as it slipped into the air—but it didn’t disappear.

It held.

No backing track.

No microphone.

Just her voice, raw and unguarded, threading itself between An’s melody.

Her chest still hurt. Her knees still felt weak. But the sound kept coming anyway, carried by something deeper than fear.

I can sing.

The gloomy version of herself—once looming, suffocating, cracked like glass, its outline blurring, fading into the noise.

Down below, Yuu didn't move.

He didn't cheer.

He just watched.

And that was enough.

Kohane lifted her chin.

Her voice grew stronger—clearer, until it no longer felt like she was chasing the song.

She was in it.

The murmurs shifted.

"That harmony…"

"Hey—she's good."

"Really good."

The room leaned in.

And for the first time, Kohane didn't feel like she was being swallowed by the crowd.

She felt like she was reaching them.

The applause crashed over the stage like a wave—loud, scattered, alive.

And then, just as suddenly—

It was over.

– Later –

Kohane stood still, hands clenched at her sides.

"I'm… I'm sorry…"

Her voice barely carried past her lips.

An turned to her at once. "It's not your fault. Neither of us could've known the music would stop like that."

"But…" Kohane swallowed hard, eyes fixed on the floor. "After all the help you gave me practicing… I—I couldn't sing at all. I only managed to sing at the very end…"

Her chest tightened.

An opened her mouth to respond—

But before she could—

(Though Kohane had only sung in the final moments, it was her voice that delivered the last, decisive blow to the crowd.)

A sharp voice cut through the lingering noise.

“What do you think you’re doing?!”

Another snapped back immediately. “What’s the big deal? You weren’t fans of those two either!”

“Don’t lump us in with your pathetic jealousy!” a third shouted. “You ruined the whole event!”

“Hey—calm down!”

An stiffened. “Huh? Is someone fighting?”

She and Kohane exchanged a glance, then slowly followed the voices toward the back of the venue.

“Akito, you idiot!”

The voice was familiar—too familiar.

“The only reason I cut the power was to help you! You said you were going to crush them!”

Kohane froze.

“…What?”

An’s eyes widened. “You cut the power?”

Akito turned sharply.

“…!”

“Why’d you have to show up now?”

“What do you mean you cut the power?” An demanded.

Akito clicked his tongue. “Tsk…”

“Crap!” the musician cursed—and bolted.

“Hey—!” An shouted.

Silence fell thick and heavy.

“…Don’t tell me,” An said slowly, disbelief creeping into her voice, “you were behind this.”

Akito didn’t answer.

Toya stepped forward. “Wait, Shiraishi. Akito wouldn’t—”

“That’s right,” Akito cut in flatly. “It was me. I was planning to crush you.”

“Akito—?!”

An stared at him. “What’s your problem?! You invite us out here just to pull something like that?!”

“I refuse,” Akito said coldly, “to let anyone without proper resolve talk about surpassing RAD WEEKEND.”

His gaze flicked to Kohane.

“And if this little girl freezes up after something this small—then that just proves she doesn’t have what it takes.”

Kohane’s breath caught.

An snapped back instantly. “Of course she’d get thrown off! It was her first event! Anyone would—!”

“Her first event?” Akito scoffed. “Is that really all you’ve got?”

His eyes narrowed.

“That’s not what you were thinking in there, was it, Shiraishi? You didn’t back down because you have resolve. If you’re serious about surpassing that night, you wouldn’t let something trivial stop you.”

An faltered. “Well…”

“But the shrimp here doesn’t feel the same,” Akito continued mercilessly. “That’s why she froze. Am I wrong?”

“Kohane’s serious! She’s been practicing like crazy for this!”

“And you think practice equals resolve?” Akito laughed sharply. “Don’t make me laugh. We’re absolutely serious. We will surpass RAD WEEKEND.”

His gaze locked onto Kohane.

“Can you say the same, shrimp?”

“….”

Silence.

Akito sneered. “See? The music world isn’t some field trip you can wander into. If this is enough to break you, then you don’t belong here.”

Kohane flinched.

“That’s enough!” Toya snapped. “Akito!”

“You jerk!” An shouted. “Kohane—wait!”

Kohane had already turned away, shoulders shaking as she ran.

An stopped mid-step, then looked back over her shoulder at Akito—eyes burning.

“I’ve seriously misjudged you.”

Meanwhile—

From someone else’s perspective.

He’d heard everything.

The argument.
The cruelty.
The silence that followed.

Behind the stage, Yuu stood with one hand gripping a man’s collar.

A hologram flickered to life above his smartwatch.

“Yuu,” Miku said calmly, “you’re overbeating that musician.”

Yuu glanced down.

The man in his grip had a nosebleed. He wasn’t moving.

“…Ah.” Yuu blinked. “Sorry.”

He gently lowered the unconscious musician to the floor.

“I guess I overdid it.”

“The scenario is still flowing as expected,” Glitching Miku noted. “But I’m surprised you didn’t intervene when Akito spoke to Kohane.”

“I already did,” Yuu replied quietly.

“You said Kohane would break if she was swallowed by despair, right?”

“…Yes.”

“Then that was enough, I gave her a small hope before the despair could swallow her on that stage.”

He looked down once more at the unconscious man.

“…And besides,” he added under his breath, “I did intervene.”

(Honestly… the entire fandom would probably agree.)

“…You really care about Kohane, don’t you?”

The question lingered in the air—soft, but sharp enough to cut.

Yuu didn’t look up.

“You could say that,” he replied calmly. Then, after a brief pause, “I’m just glad she didn't die."

– Before the event –

The street had been alive with noise—music tests, footsteps, laughter—but Yuu stood apart from it all, half-swallowed by shadow near the edge of Kamiyama Street.

“Miku.”

A familiar distortion crackled to life.

Light fragmented above his smartwatch, pixels tearing and reassembling until the hologram stabilized. The girl smiled—glitching, incomplete.

“I found it, Yuu,” she said.

His expression didn’t change.

“…Go on.”

“Kohane Azusawa will die,” Miku continued, voice eerily gentle. “After the event. Cause of death: vehicular collision.”

Yuu exhaled slowly.

“A car accident…”

“Yes. This will be the first major anomaly in Vivid BAD SQUAD’s story.”

For a moment, the world felt quieter—like it was holding its breath.

“After the event…” Yuu murmured. “Okay. I know what to do.”

Miku tilted her head. “You’re intervening?”

“Of course,” he said without hesitation.

– Present –

“With this…” Yuu muttered, eyes tracking the chaos behind the stage, “…their story will continue.”

The live house still throbbed with sound. Akito and Toya were back on stage, voices cutting through the crowd as if nothing had gone wrong—like the fracture hadn’t already formed beneath their feet.

“Right now, Akito and Toya are still performing.”

His gaze drifted toward the side of street where Kohane had disappeared.

“…And Kohane—”

He shook his head once.

“She’ll be fine.”

There was no blind optimism in his voice.

Just certainty.

(After all, Kohane is not weak.)
(And I know the flow of the story.)

A faint flicker returned above his wrist.

“Yuu,” Miku said, tone shifting. “There’s going to be a second anomaly.”

His eyes narrowed slightly.

“…It’s Aoyagi-kun, isn’t it?”

“Yes.”

The hologram glitched harder this time—static bleeding into her outline.

Silence followed.

Yuu straightened.

“…Then things are about to deviate even further.”

Chapter 66: Envy

Weekend Garage

“An. You’re spacing out again.”

The warmth of the counter seeped into her palms as she jolted, fingers tightening around the glass she’d been wiping.

“Oh—yeah. Sorry.”

“Okay.”

His footsteps faded, swallowed by the clink of cups and the muted jazz drifting through the café. An exhaled, shoulders sagging the moment she was alone.

Her phone rested beside the register, screen dark now—but she could still see it in her mind.

Read.

No reply.

Kohane had seen the messages. She knew that much. And still… nothing.

(I wasn’t there when she needed me)

(So much for saying I’d help her.)

Her thumb hovered over the screen again before she pulled her hand back, frustration curling in her chest.

Hazuki-kun wasn’t answering either.

She had been so excited, too.

Showing Kohane the town—every cramped alley filled with music, every event that made the streets feel alive.

Watching her eyes light up, watching her slowly fall in love with this place the same way An had.

That was how it was supposed to go.

But now…

An straightened abruptly, resolve flaring as she grabbed her bag from beneath the counter. “Sorry, Dad! I need to go see Kohane so I can—”

The bell above the café door chimed, its clear ring cutting her off mid-sentence.

“An…”

Her breath caught.

She turned.

“Huh? Kohane?”

The familiar scent of coffee and worn wood filled the air as Kohane stood just inside Weekend Garage, her fingers twisting together in front of her. The place felt the same as always—and yet, she felt different standing there now.

“Kohane.”

An’s voice snapped her out of her thoughts. When Kohane looked up, An’s eyes widened immediately.

“An, I know you’ve been worried,” Kohane said quickly, bowing her head. “I’m sorry for not returning your messages.”

An barely seemed to hear her.

“Forget that—what happened to your hair?!” she blurted out. “And your glasses, too?!”

Kohane blinked, then reached up unconsciously, brushing her fingers through her shorter hair. “Ah… yeah. Um. Yesterday, I…”

Her voice trailed off as the memories surfaced—the silence after the event, the weight in her chest, the way her feet had carried her somewhere familiar without thinking.

“…I went to Street SEKAI,” she continued softly. “I needed somewhere to vent. Somewhere I could think.”

An’s expression eased, her posture relaxing as she listened. “I see… So you went to see Miku and the others.”

Kohane nodded. “Yeah. And… I made a decision.”

An tilted her head. “You did?”

Kohane straightened, her hands tightening into small fists at her sides—not out of fear, but resolve.

“After what Shinonome said yesterday… I realized he was right,” she admitted. “I wasn’t taking this as seriously as all of you were. I thought I was—but I wasn’t really facing it.”

An stayed silent, letting her speak.

“Then I remembered what it felt like,” Kohane continued, her voice growing steadier, “the first time we sang together here. How my heart raced. How fun it was. How alive it felt.”

She lifted her gaze, meeting An’s eyes directly.

“It made me realize I want to put on an event with you—one that makes other people feel the same way we did. I know I still have a lot to learn. I know I’m not there yet…”

She took a breath.

“But I want to work toward that goal together.”

Her voice didn’t waver.

“With everything I have.”

For a moment, An simply stared at her.

Then—

“—!!”

An broke into a wide grin, stepping forward and grabbing Kohane’s hands.

“I knew I was right about you!” she said, laughter bright in her voice. “You’re the best singing partner I could’ve asked for, Kohane!”

Kohane’s shoulders relaxed, a small laugh escaping her. “Hehe… Thanks, An.”

“Alright!” An declared, already fired up. “Then let’s start practicing again and aim for another event! We’ll teach those BAD DOGS a lesson—and one day, we’ll put on a show that surpasses RAD WEEKEND together!”

Kohane nodded firmly. “Yeah!”

An paused mid-motion, brows knitting slightly. “But… aren’t we missing one person?”

Kohane blinked. “Huh?”

She thought about it—and then it hit her.

“…Now that I think about it,” Kohane said slowly, her voice softening, “I haven’t seen Hazuki-kun since the show…”

An glanced toward the entrance of the café, then back at Kohane.

“…You’re right.”

Weekend Garage

“Jeez… that Yuu,” An muttered, arms crossed as she glanced toward the café entrance. “He said he’d come here.”

“He did?” Kohane asked, surprised.

“Yeah! He wanted to talk about your comeback!”

Before Kohane could respond, the familiar jingle of the café bell rang through the room.

“Hello?” Akito’s voice followed. He glanced around lazily. “Huh. Looks like Ken’s out again.”

An turned sharply. “Speak of the devil. Nice timing.”

Akito raised an eyebrow, unimpressed. “What gives? Is that the kind of look you always give your customers?”

Toya, standing just behind him, paused. His gaze lingered on Kohane for a second longer than necessary.

“…Azusawa? You changed your hair.”

Kohane stiffened instinctively.

Akito squinted. “Huh? Wait—you’re that shrimp from yesterday? You’re still hanging around?” His tone sharpened. “I thought I made myself clear. This isn’t the place for some half-hearted—”

“I don’t do anything half-hearted.”

The words came out firm—clearer than Kohane expected.

Akito blinked. “What?”

Kohane lifted her chin, meeting his gaze without flinching. “We’ve decided to perform again.”

Akito scoffed. “Excuse me?”

An stepped in beside her, grinning sharply. “So where are you guys singing next? I was just thinking we should crash your event.”

Akito’s expression darkened. “Do you even realize what you’re saying right now?” His voice dropped. “There’s nothing I hate more than people with weak resolve. If you’re really planning to perform at the same event as us again…”

He smirked.

“We’ll crush you once and for all. No tricks this time.”

“We have the resolve.”

Akito froze.

Kohane’s hands trembled slightly—but she didn’t back down.

“I may not know much about RAD WEEKEND,” she continued, voice shaking but steady, “or understand the feelings of everyone who sang there. But even so—”

She clenched her fists.

“I want to organize a great event with An. One that gives everyone the best experience of their lives. So I won’t run away anymore.”

Silence fell like a held breath.

“…Next Saturday,” Toya said quietly. “We’re singing at Mossy Stone. There should still be some slots open.”

An smiled. “Great. Then that’s where we’ll do this. Fair and square.”

Akito scoffed. “It’s your funeral. Let’s go, Toya. No reason to stick around if Ken’s not here.”

The café bell rang again as they turned to leave.

Just before stepping out, Toya stopped.

“…Azusawa. Shiraishi.”

“Hm?” Kohane blinked.

“Are you two really serious about holding an event that surpasses RAD WEEKEND?”

“Of course!” An and Kohane answered together.

Toya let out a small breath—almost a laugh. “…Heh. I see. I’m looking forward to it.”

“Huh? Th-Thank you…” Kohane murmured.

The bell rang once more as the door shut behind them.

An exhaled loudly. “You were great, Kohane.”

“Hehehe… I—I was so nervous…”

“You lot sure have plenty of energy.”

The deep voice came from behind the counter.

“Ah! D-Dad!” An spun around. “Were you listening to all of that?!”

“It’s kind of hard not to when you’re being that loud,” Ken said with a chuckle. “Could hear you all the way from the back.” He glanced at Kohane. “Hey. The new haircut looks great.”

“Th-Thank you…”

Ken’s gaze softened—but sharpened in a different way. “I like that look in your eyes, too. You’re starting to look a bit more like An and Akito.”

An scowled. “What’s that supposed to mean? How can you compare me to him?”

“No need to get defensive,” Ken replied calmly. “If I had to put it into words… he looks like someone with fight in him. Like he has something to lose.”

“…Something to lose?” An echoed.

“You’ll understand soon enough.” Ken turned away. “All right. Time to get ready for tonight.”

An crossed her arms. “A jerk like Akito? Having something to lose?”

Jingle.

The café bell rang again.

“Huh?” a familiar voice said lightly. “Did I miss something?”

An’s eyes widened. “Nagi!”

Ken smiled. “You’re right on time.”

– Switching to Toya and Akito's perspective –

Kamiyama Street

Akito clicked his tongue. “Tsk. What was that about?” His hands were shoved deep into his pockets, irritation written plainly across his face. “Getting lip from a shrimp like that… I bet Shiraishi fed her every single word.”

He scoffed, eyes burning with certainty. “We’re the ones who are going to surpass RAD WEEKEND. And this time, we’ll make damn sure they know it.”

Toya said nothing.

His gaze lingered on the pavement ahead, footsteps steady but distant, as if his thoughts were somewhere else entirely.

Akito glanced sideways. “What’s wrong? You feeling all right?”

“…Yeah,” Toya replied after a beat. “It’s nothing.”

Akito shrugged it off. “Then let’s start thinking about our next set list.” A grin tugged at his lips, sharp and confident. “We’ll crush them for sure this time.”

Toya slowed—just a fraction.

“……”

“Akito,” he began quietly.

“Hm?” Akito looked back, impatient but attentive.

Toya hesitated, fingers curling slightly at his side. The words he wanted to say pressed against his chest—about resolve, about Kohane’s eyes, about the way she hadn’t backed down—

“…Nothing,” he said at last. “I was just thinking… maybe we could do an encore.”

Akito’s face lit up instantly. “Oh?” He laughed, slapping Toya lightly on the shoulder. “You’re smart! As expected of you, buddy!”

His grin widened, fierce and unyielding. “Let’s give them hell.”

Toya nodded—but his eyes drifted away again, unease quietly settling where certainty should have been.

Aoyagi Residence — Late Night

The front door clicked shut with a muted echo.

“I’m home.”

The house felt too quiet.

Too orderly.

From the living room, his mother looked up, worry softening her expression. “You were out late again, Toya. I was starting to get worried.” She hesitated, then added gently, “Your father was waiting for you.”

Toya said nothing.

He slipped past her, shoes neatly aligned at the entrance, footsteps carrying him down the familiar hallway.

– Toya’s Room –

The door closed behind him with a soft thud.

“…Sigh.”

He sat on the edge of his bed, shoulders slumping as the tension he’d been holding finally leaked out. The room was immaculate—music scores stacked perfectly, instruments resting where they were supposed to be. A space built for discipline, not uncertainty.

The door opened.

Toya stiffened.

His father stood there, tall and unyielding, arms crossed.

“Do you have any idea what time it is?”

“…Dad.”

“You were over on that street again,” his father continued coldly. “Playing that garbage music.”

Silence.

“How long do you plan on wasting your time, Toya?” His voice sharpened. “If you spent half as much effort practicing as you do fooling around, you could already be competing at the national level.”

Toya clenched his fists.

“I’m not messing around,” he said quietly—but firmly. “And no matter what you say, I’m not going back to classical music.”

He looked up, meeting his father’s gaze for once.

“…Please. Just get out.”

For a moment, the room felt unbearably still.

“What a waste,” his father said at last. “I can’t believe how far you’ve been dragged down by a single bad influence.”

Toya's breath hitched. "Dad—Akito's got nothing to do with this!"

The door slammed shut.

The silence afterward was heavier than the shouting.

Toya leaned back, staring at the ceiling.

(Akito's been serious for a long time…)

(Ever since he saw RAD WEEKEND.)

His jaw tightened.

(I'm nothing like him. I would've done anything… as long as it wasn't classical.)

The words echoed bitterly.

Then—

"Saying you're going to surpass RAD WEEKEND isn't something you can say half-heartedly."

Akito's voice rang clear in his memory.

Toya slowly rose and stood before the mirror.

The reflection staring back at him looked composed. Controlled.

But behind his eyes—

"…Akito," he murmured, barely audible. "I'm the one with weak resolve."

His fingers curled at his side.

"I… shouldn't be the one up there with you."

Another voice surfaced—gentler, but unshaken.

"I want to work toward that goal together. With everything I have."

Kohane's words.

Unwavering.

Toya's gaze faltered.

(I'm envious of you, Azusawa-san… Unlike you—)

The thought trailed off, unfinished.

And for the first time, the doubt he'd been carrying no longer felt quiet.

It felt heavy.

Mossy Stone — Backstage

The low hum of the live house pressed in from beyond the walls—bass reverberating through concrete, voices rising and falling like a restless tide.

Akito cracked his neck, eyes sharp as he glanced toward An and Kohane.

“Time to put your money where your mouth is,” he said flatly. “Let’s see what you’ve really got.”

An scoffed, crossing her arms. “Careful what you wish for. We came prepared—with our best song yet.” Her gaze hardened. “And don’t even think about pulling some cowardly stunt like last time.”

“Tsk.” Akito looked away. “As if I’d stoop that low.”

“Don’t worry,” a calm voice cut in. “This time, I’m here.”

Yuu stood a few steps back, lifting a hand in a small wave, posture relaxed—but eyes alert.

“Yeah!” An said quickly. “I asked for permission to have Yuu watch from backstage. Just in case.”

Yuu’s gaze slid back to Akito, unreadable. “Pretty sure nothing’s going to happen this time… right, Akito-kun?”

Akito clicked his tongue. “It won’t. Come on, Toya. We’re on first tonight.” He turned, confidence sharp as a blade. “Let’s show them what real talent looks like.”

“…Hey, Toya?”

Toya stood still.

“So bright…” he murmured.

Akito frowned. “Bright? What are you talking about?”

“…Nothing,” Toya said after a beat. “Let’s go.”

Live House — Stage

The lights flared to life.

Akito and Toya stepped forward as one—and the music hit.

The beat slammed through the crowd, raw and relentless, Akito’s voice cutting through the rhythm with sheer force while Toya’s precision anchored every note. Their sound filled the venue, commanding attention, refusing to let go.

Hands shot into the air.

The crowd roared.

By the time the final note rang out, the air felt electric.

“We’re BAD DOGS!” Akito shouted, breathless and grinning. “Thanks for coming tonight!”

The cheering surged louder.

Backstage, An clenched her fists.

(I knew they were good… But tonight, they're on a completely different level.)

Her jaw tightened.

(So why… why did they mess with the power back then?)

"You're wondering why they cut it," Yuu's voice said quietly beside her.

An startled. "H—How did you—?" She cleared her throat. "…Yeah. I don't get it."

"I'll explain later on Street SEKAI." His tone softened just a fraction. "For now—focus on what you need to do."

An's eyes widened.

Then she nodded.

"You're right," she said, resolve settling in her chest. "Right now, I just need to sing."

Akito and Toya reentered backstage, sweat still clinging to them.

Akito smirked. "Your turn." His eyes flicked to Kohane. "You're not going to let us down now… are you?"

An stepped forward, fire in her gaze. "Just you watch. And I expect you two to be in the front row."

She turned, reaching for Kohane's hand.

"Come on," An said firmly. "Let's give them a taste of our best song."

Kohane swallowed—then nodded.

"…Yeah."

Together, they headed for the stage.

And this time, neither of them looked back.

As Kohane and An took the stage, the atmosphere shifted.

Akito leaned forward without realizing it.

The sound—
No, not just the sound.

The way they sang.

Akito's eyes widened.

"Huh…?" His breath caught. "This is—"

A memory surged up uninvited.

That night.

The packed street.

The lights.

The voices that burned themselves into his chest.

Nagi and Ken.

♪—!!!

“You’ve gotta be kidding me…” Akito muttered.

Toya nodded slowly, eyes fixed on the stage. “I thought so.”

He glanced at Akito.

Then back to Kohane and An.

“Those two… they’re the same as you.”

Yuu folded his arms, gaze calm but sharp. “Yeah,” he said quietly. “Azusawa-san… and Shiraishi-san.”

Akito scoffed, forcing a laugh. “The same as me? That’s impossible.”

Yuu didn’t look away from the stage. “Don’t you think it’s about time you admitted it?”

Akito fell silent.

The song ended.

For a split second, there was nothing.

Then—

Cheering erupted.

The crowd roared, louder than before.

“We’re the Vivids!” An shouted, grinning as she wiped sweat from her brow. “Did everyone enjoy the show?!”

More cheers.

“U-Um—!” Kohane stepped forward, voice shaking but clear. “Thank you very much!”

The response only grew.

An took a breath, eyes burning bright.

“We may be new,” she said, “but one day, we’re going to throw an event that surpasses even RAD WEEKEND!”

The name sent a ripple through the crowd.

“We hope you’ll be there when that day comes!”

They bowed deeply before hurrying backstage.

“You two did well,” Yuu said simply.

An laughed. “Haha! That was nothing. If we’re serious about surpassing that night, we’ve gotta give it everything!”

“Oh?” Yuu smirked, then turned to Kohane. “How was it?”

He tilted his head. “Do you feel it? That feeling?”

“Y-Yeah…!” Kohane nodded quickly.

“That’s good,” Yuu said softly. “At least you’re starting to change.”

A few steps away—

Akito clenched his fists.

“Those two…” he muttered.

Toya stayed silent.

(Akito. Shiraishi. Azusawa... They’re all staking everything on their dreams.)

Toya’s chest tightened.

(But me?)

(I’d have taken anything—as long as it wasn’t classical.)

His hands trembled.

“…This is as far as I go,” Toya whispered.

An approached with Kohane and Yuu in tow.

Toya’s shoulders shook.

He didn’t turn around.

“Well?” An said, crossing her arms. “You convinced about Kohane’s ability now?”

Akito clicked his tongue. “Why do you sound so proud?”

He paused.

“…I admit it. You’ve got resolve.” His gaze sharpened. “So answer me honestly. Are you two really serious about surpassing RAD WEEKEND?”

“Of course!” An replied instantly.

“Y-Yeah!” Kohane nodded.

Akito exhaled.
“…I see. Your song was good.” He looked away. “Sorry about messing things up before.”

“Huh?” Kohane blinked. “Th—Thank you…”

“Oh?” An smirked. “That was easier than I thought. Maybe you’re more honest than you look.”

“Oh, shut up,” Akito snapped. “If you’re done, get out of here already.”

“Yeah, yeah.” An turned, waving. “Oh—but you two weren’t half bad yourselves. Good job, Akito. Toya~♪”

“Hey—!” Akito protested.

“Come on, Kohane!” An grabbed her wrist. “Let’s get changed! And Yuu—don’t you dare go home. We’re celebrating!”

“S-Sure—ah! Wait!” Kohane stumbled after her.

Yuu chuckled. “I’ll wait outside the staff room. See you.”

“Yeah, yeah,” Akito muttered.

Yuu walked a few steps—then paused.

He glanced back at Toya, sighed quietly, and turned away.

Akito crossed his arms. “Seriously, they’re full of themselves.” He smirked. “Hey, Toya. We’re changing the setlist for the next event. We’ll put on a performance so good they’ll regret ever challenging us.”

“…Toya?”

No response.

“Toya?” Akito frowned. “What’s wrong?”

Toya’s shoulders shook.

He didn’t turn around.

“Akito…” His voice cracked.

“I—I can’t perform with you anymore.”

Chapter 67: Commitment

Akito stared at him, disbelief twisting into irritation.

“You won’t perform anymore?” he scoffed. “What are you talking about? You know you’re terrible at jokes. Stop messing around.”

Toya didn’t look at him.

“This isn’t a joke.”

Akito’s brow furrowed.

“…Did your old man say something again?”

Silence.

Then—

“This is my own decision,” Toya said quietly. “Our kind of music doesn’t mean anything. It’s just a bunch of kids making noise.”

Akito froze.

“…You’re serious?”

Toya finally met his eyes. “You’re the one who said I’m bad at jokes.”

Something snapped.

“That’s crossing a line,” Akito snarled. “Our music has no meaning? Say that again. I dare you.” His fists clenched. “I won’t take that from anyone—especially not you!”

He stepped closer.

“So what, then?” Akito continued. “You’re gonna quit? Crawl back and let your dad chain you up again after everything you said? After how much you hated it?” His voice shook.
“How is that any more meaningful?!”

“…Let go of me.”

Akito didn’t realize he’d grabbed Toya’s sleeve until then.

“Get back here! This conversation isn’t over!”

Leave.”

Toya didn’t move.

“And don’t ever show your face around here again!”

Silence followed.

Then—

Footsteps.

Slow.

Uneven.

Toya pushed himself up, turning away without another word.

The sound of his steps faded down the corridor.

— Later —

— Street SEKAI - Crase Café —

The familiar bell chimed as the door swung open.

“Hello!”

Kohane’s voice rang out first, bright and clear, followed closely by An’s and Yuu’s.

MEIKO looked up from behind the counter, her expression lighting up. “Welcome back! It’s good to see you.” Her eyes lingered on Kohane for a moment, warm and observant. “…Oh? You cut your hair.”

Len leaned forward, squinting. “Hey, Kohane—why’d you change it?”

An grinned, resting a hand on Kohane’s shoulder. “Hehe. It’s proof of her resolve, right?”

Kohane nodded eagerly. “That’s right!”

“It suits you,” Yuu added, simply.

Kohane froze.

Color rushed to her cheeks as she turned away slightly, fingers brushing the ends of her hair. “Ah —”

“Jeez!” An spun toward Yuu. “What are you doing making her flustered like that?!”

Yuu blinked. “Huh? But I’m just saying the truth.”

A soft ripple of laughter spread through the café.

Len chuckled. MEIKO smiled knowingly. Even Miku let out a quiet giggle.

“So?” Miku asked, stepping forward. “How did it go?”

Kohane straightened, hands clasped in front of her. “Thanks to An—and everyone’s support—I managed to perform again. And… it went really well.” She bowed deeply. “Thank you so much for helping me.”

Miku's smile softened. "That's wonderful."

Kohane hesitated, then looked up. "Miku… why are you all taking such an interest in us?"

Miku tilted her head, her twin-tails swaying gently. "Because we want you to discover your true feelings. When you do, those feelings will be transformed into a new song." Her voice was gentle, but certain. "Our wish is that those emotions give birth to all kinds of new songs."

"Our feelings… become a song…" Kohane murmured.

"Yeah!" Len jumped in. "And that's why we've gotta help the other two realize their true feelings too!"

An blinked. "Other two?"

She glanced around the café. "You said this place was made from the feelings of four people, right? Do you know who the other two are?"

Len scratched his head. "We haven't really had the chance to talk to them yet."

Yuu spoke before An could ask more.

"Toya Aoyagi-kun and Shinonome Akito-kun."

An stiffened. "Akito and… Toya?!"

Len's eyes widened. "W-Wait, you know them?"

An hesitated, her confidence faltering. "I mean… I wouldn't exactly call us friends. It's… complicated." She looked away. "But they did say they wanted to surpass RAD WEEKEND."

Miku clasped her hands together, hopeful. "Then maybe they'll visit us soon."

"Hopefully."

The word slipped from Yuu's lips almost unconsciously.

He had already turned away, gaze distant, something unreadable crossing his face.

Kohane noticed.

"Hazuki-kun?" she called. "Where are you going?"

Yuu paused at the doorway, fingers curling slightly.

"I just remembered something," he said quietly. "See you tomorrow..."

"Eh? Wait! Hazu–"

"There he goes..."

And with that, he stepped outside—

— Meanwhile, from someone's perspective —

— Kamiyama Street —

The neon lights blurred together as he walked, footsteps uneven against the pavement. Akito kept his head down, hands shoved deep into his pockets, jaw clenched tight enough to ache.

Kamiyama Street was quieter at this hour.

Too quiet.

And in that silence—

A memory surfaced.

“Hey,” Akito’s voice echoed from somewhere behind him. “You’ve been singing around here a lot lately.”

Toya hadn’t even turned around.

“So what if I have?”

“Nothing,” Akito replied, shrugging. “Just noticed, that’s all. Was wondering why you picked this place, of all places.”

“…It’s nothing worth getting curious about.”

Akito scoffed. “You’re always like that.”

Then, more thoughtfully, “Your rhythm and pitch are always spot-on. You’ve been into music for a while, haven’t you?”

“…I guess you could say that.”

Akito’s eyes had lit up then. “Oh? So there is a story behind it.”

Silence.

Then, quietly, almost reluctantly—

“…When I sing here,” Toya had said, “I feel like I can be myself.”

That had stopped Akito in his tracks.

“So music’s what keeps you going, huh?” Akito grinned, excitement bleeding into his voice. “Man, now I’m really interested. Hey—how about we try singing together?”

The memory fractured—

—

— WEEKEND GARAGE —

The smell of coffee. Old speakers. History soaked into the walls.

“So,” An’s father said, arms crossed, watching them carefully, “you two decided to team up?”

“Yeah,” Akito answered quickly. “There’s something else we wanted to tell you, too. Care to guess?”

“We’ve decided to call ourselves BAD DOGS,” Toya said calmly.

Akito spun on him. “What the heck, Toya?! I wanted to tell him!”

“Then just say it,” Toya replied flatly. “No need to act smug and drag it out.”

Akito groaned. “How is it that someone who barely talks always cuts in at the worst possible time?”

The memory lingered on Toya’s faint smile—barely there, but real.

—

—

The present slammed back into place.

Kamiyama Street stretched out before him, empty and cold.

Akito clicked his tongue sharply, stopping in his tracks.

“…Damn it.”

The word fell flat against the night, swallowed by the street that had once echoed with their voices.

ust as Akito stepped off the curb—

A horn blared.

Headlights tore through the darkness, far too close, far too fast. The engine screamed as the car surged forward, tires screeching against asphalt.

Akito’s eyes widened.

Too fast, Too close—

His body reacted a fraction too late.

Suddenly, an arm hooked around his shoulder and yanked him back with force. His heel scraped against the road as he stumbled, the rush of air slicing past his face—

The car shot by, missing him by inches.

For a moment, there was only the sound of Akito’s breathing—ragged, sharp, uncontrollable.

“…That was close.”

The voice came from beside him.

Akito blinked, vision swimming, heart hammering violently against his ribs. A hand appeared in front of him, steady and offered without hesitation.

“Are you okay?”

Akito looked up.

“H—Hazuki-san…?”

He hesitated, then grabbed the hand. Yuu pulled him upright with ease, grip firm but careful, like he was making sure Akito wouldn’t collapse again.

“Where’s Aoyagi-kun?” Yuu asked, eyes flicking briefly toward the empty street.

Akito’s jaw tightened.

“He…”
Silence stretched.
“…He went home.”

Yuu studied him for a moment longer than necessary. Then his gaze dropped.

“Oh?” he said lightly. “Then what’s with the bruise on your cheek?”

Akito stiffened instantly.

“It has nothing to do with you!!”

The words came out sharp, almost panicked—too loud for a street this quiet.

Yuu didn’t flinch.

Instead, he straightened, hands slipping back into his pockets, expression unreadable beneath the streetlights.

“…I see,” he said softly.

And somehow, that calm response made Akito feel worse than if he’d been yelled at.

“…Sorry.”

The word slipped out before Akito could stop it.

Yuu glanced at him, surprised—just a little—then shook his head. “It’s alright. I think I’m starting to get the gist of what happened.”

“Ha?” Akito scoffed, turning his face away. “Don’t be a weirdo. You don’t know anything.”

Yuu didn’t argue.

Instead, he looked down the street—the empty stretch of road, the flickering traffic light, the place where two people should have been standing together.

“Aoyagi-kun…” he said quietly. "…Left you, didn’t he?”

Akito froze.

The night air felt heavier all of a sudden, pressing against his chest. His fingers curled into fists inside his pockets. He opened his mouth—

—and closed it again.

Silence.

Yuu exhaled, slow and measured. “I’ll take that silence as a yes.”

Akito clicked his tongue, frustration burning hot behind his eyes. “Tch… you’re annoying.”

Yet he didn’t deny it.

Akito stared at the pavement.

“…He said our music didn’t mean anything,” he muttered. “Said it was just noise. Like RAD WEEKEND was some stupid little event no one cares about.”

“And you didn’t believe that,” he said.

Akito clenched his jaw. “Then why did he say it?”

Yuu didn’t answer right away.

“…Because people say the cruelest things when they’re trying to run,” he said at last. “Especially from themselves.”

Akito laughed bitterly. “You talk like you know everything.”

“I don’t, But I know this.”

He looked Akito straight in the eye.

“He didn’t leave because the music meant nothing.”

Akito’s breath hitched.

“…He left because it meant too much.”

“I don’t get it…”

Akito said it under his breath as he turned away, the words left hanging between them. He shoved his hands deeper into his pockets and started walking.

Yuu watched him for a moment before following at a distance.

“Want me to walk you home?”

Akito didn’t slow down. “I’m good.”

The answer came too fast.

Yuu hummed softly. “You almost got hit by a car five minutes ago.”

“…That was different.”

“How?”

Akito stopped.

Streetlight glow spilled over his back, outlining tense shoulders and a spine held too straight. For a second, it looked like he might snap back with something sharp—

—but instead, his voice came out rough.

Yuu hummed softly. “You almost got hit by a car five minutes ago.”

“…That was different.”

“How?”

Akito stopped.

Streetlight glow spilled over his back, outlining tense shoulders and a spine held too straight. For a second, it looked like he might snap back with something sharp—

—but instead, his voice came out rough.

“…I just don’t want anyone hovering over me right now.”

Yuu nodded once. “Fair.”

He didn’t push.

Akito took a step forward again, then hesitated. His fingers twitched, knuckles whitening.

“…He didn’t even look back,” he muttered. “Not once.”

Yuu stayed quiet. Let the words exist.

After a few seconds, Akito exhaled through his nose. “You can walk. Just—don’t say anything stupid.”

Yuu allowed himself a small smile.

“Deal.”

Just as they walked together—

“Hey,” Akito said suddenly. “Have we met before?”

Yuu’s steps faltered for half a beat.

His eyes widened, just barely—before he looked away and shook his head. “No.”

Akito squinted at him. “You hesitated.”

“You’re the one who said to only walk,” Yuu replied smoothly, hands still in his pockets. “No talking.”

“Ha? Don’t flip that on me!” Akito scoffed. “You’re the one making it awkward.”

The street hummed around them—distant engines, flickering neon, the quiet rhythm of late-night footsteps.

Yuu didn’t answer right away.

“…I wonder,” Akito muttered, more to himself than anything. “I just feel like we've met before... No... It feels like we know each other."

Yuu glanced at him again.

This time, he smiled.

“Maybe,” he said softly. “Or maybe you’re just not used to someone actually listening.”

Akito clicked his tongue. “Tch. Don’t get weird.”

Akito sped up.

And Yuu didn’t fall behind.

After a few more minutes of walking, Akito slowed to a stop.

“You can go now,” he said, gesturing vaguely down the street. “I can take it from here.”

Yuu followed his gaze, then nodded once. “Oh… I see. Alright.”

He turned, footsteps carrying him away at an unhurried pace.

“…Hey.”

Yuu stopped.

Just that.

Yuu turned back and continued down the street, his figure gradually swallowed by the glow of neon and shadow.

Akito watched until he was gone.

Then, quietly, he stepped inside.

He didn’t turn around right away.

When he did, Akito was standing under a dim streetlight, hands shoved into his pockets, shoulders stiff.

“What is it?” Yuu asked.

Akito hesitated. The words clearly didn’t come easy.

"…Thank you," he said at last. "For saving me."

For a moment, Yuu simply looked at him.

Then—

"…Sure."

– Switching to Yuu's side –

"Miku."

The night air was still as Yuu slowed his steps, the city's noise dulled to a distant hum. He lifted his wrist, the screen of his smartwatch flickering—then distorting.

A hologram bloomed into existence, light fragmenting and reassembling into her familiar form. Glitches crawled along her outline like static caught between frames.

"It wasn't Aoyagi," Miku said softly. "It was Shinonome."

Yuu exhaled through his nose. "I thought so."

He stared ahead, eyes unfocused, replaying the moment in his mind—the screech of tires, the weight he'd dragged back from the edge.

"But something feels off," he continued. "If Akito almost died here…" His fingers curled slightly. "Then what happened to Toya?"

Miku's expression faltered, her form flickering more violently for a split second.

"…I don't know," she admitted. "The data past this point is unstable. But whatever's happening, we'll need to keep watching."

Yuu was quiet for a long moment.

The streetlights blurred faintly as he lowered his gaze.

"I don't want to loop, Miku," he said at last, voice low. "Not again."

(A/N: He remembers the time Honami k*lled herself on the bridge)

His grip tightened around his wrist.

"It feels like… if I do, I can feel their pain. Like it doesn't reset for me anymore."

Miku's light softened.

"…I understand."

The hologram slowly faded, leaving Yuu alone.

Chapter 68: What's your true feelings!

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

— The Next Day —

Weekend Garage

The café bell chimed softly as the door swung open, letting in the afternoon air along with Kohane and An.

Kohane lifted her head—and froze.

Shinonome Akito was in a seat alone.

His expression was sharp, eyes shadowed, jaw set as if every sound in the room grated against him.

“H-Hello…!” Kohane blurted out instinctively. “O-Oh—Sh-Shinonome-kun…”

Akito glanced up. “What?”

“Eep—! N-Nothing!” Kohane shrank back a step, clutching her sleeves.

(S-So scary…)

Her heart thumped uneasily as she stole another glance at him.

(He looks… upset. Did something happen?)

An leaned closer, lowering her voice. “I don’t know. I was actually thinking of telling him about the SEKAI, but he’s been like that since he showed up.”

Kohane blinked. “Huh? Aoyagi-kun isn’t here today?”

“Nope. Haven’t seen him at all,” An replied, frowning slightly. “Maybe they had a fight or something.”

“A… fight?”

An shrugged. “It’ll probably blow over. Anyway—oh! Someone from a club nearby called SPACE asked if we wanted to perform there. What do you think?”

Kohane hesitated, then nodded. “Y-Yeah… I’d like to try.”

Akito remained silent behind the counter, gaze unfocused.

Kohane watched him from the corner of her eye.

(I wonder if Shinonome and Aoyagi are really okay…)

— One Week Later —

Live House – SPACE

The venue buzzed with low chatter and humming equipment.

“Oh. Akito.”

He turned, surprised. “You guys are here too?”

An crossed her arms. “Something wrong with that? It’s not every day I see you hanging around by yourself. What happened—your friend finally decide he’s had enough of you?”

“A-An!” Kohane hissed, tugging at An’s sleeve.

Akito didn’t rise to the bait. His gaze dropped to the floor.

“…Turns out we never really understood each other.”

He turned away, footsteps echoing briefly before fading into the crowd.

An watched him go, brow furrowed. “What’s got him so depressed?”

“Maybe… they really did have a fight,” Kohane said quietly. “Do you think they’re all right?”

“You’re probably right,” An replied after a pause. “But it’s not something you should worry about, Kohane.”

“I-I guess…”

Still, unease lingered in Kohane’s chest.

(Should I tell Hazuki-kun…? Maybe… he could help.)

— The Next Day —

Music Shop

“Hehe…” Kohane hugged the small paper bag to her chest. “I finally got the CD I ordered. An should be here soon, so I’ll just—oh!”

She nearly collided with someone standing just ahead.

“….”

Her breath caught.

“A-Aoyagi…?”

Toya stood there, hands in his pockets, expression calm—but distant. Like someone standing a step removed from the world.

“Oh. Hey, Azusawa-san,” he said. “Been a while.”

“Y-Yeah… it has…”

Silence stretched between them, heavy and awkward.

“Um… Aoyagi-kun…” Kohane gathered her courage.

“What is it?”

“It’s just… I haven’t seen you at any events lately. And you haven’t been coming to Weekend Garage…” She hesitated, then pressed on. “We performed at the same event as Shinonome last night, and he looked really distracted. An even said his performance felt off. Did you two… get into a fight?”

Toya was quiet for a long moment.

“…I wouldn’t exactly call it a fight,” he said at last. “But that’s on me. Honestly… this is something I should’ve done a long time ago.”

He took a step back.

“Oh…” Kohane murmured.

Before she could say more—

“Kohane! Sorry I’m late!”

An burst into the shop, dragging someone along by the sleeve.

“I saw Hazuki-kun nearby and decided to pull him with us!”

“Ehh—” Yuu protested mildly. “You texted me and showed up at my house while I was practicing.”

“That can wait!” An shot back.

Kohane laughed softly. “It’s okay. I just got here a few minutes ago.”
Then she hesitated. “I saw Aoyagi just now… He seemed really down.”

“Really?” An frowned. “So they really did have a falling out… But why are you so worried about those two after everything they did to us?”

“Well…” Kohane clasped her hands together. “We see them a lot at Weekend Garage, and… even if a lot happened, they did acknowledge us in the end…”

Yuu, who’d been quietly observing, hummed softly. “Hmm…”

Just then, footsteps approached.

The musician from before stopped in front of them—then noticed Yuu.

He stiffened immediately, straightening up like a soldier caught out of line.

“E-Excuse me… do you have a moment?”

“Huh?” Kohane blinked. “Um…”

An's eyes narrowed. "Hey—you're the guy who helped mess with the sound at RED! What do you want?" She paused. "And… what happened to your face?"

"Now, now," Yuu said calmly. "Let's hear him out."

The musician swallowed hard.

"I—I wanted to apologize. And to tell you something important." He bowed deeply. "Akito and Toya weren't involved that night."

"R-Really?" Kohane gasped.

"Seriously?!" An snapped. "You're saying they didn't ask you to do it?"

"They planned to face you fair and square," the musician admitted. "Cutting the power… was my idea. They didn't know."

An exhaled sharply, running a hand through her hair. "Unbelievable… You totally ruined the event." She squinted at Yuu. "And how exactly do you know Hazuki-kun?"

Yuu looked away. "…I investigated the backstage."

"I—I'm really sorry!" The musician bowed again. Then, quieter—"And… I deserved the beating."

"You resorted to violence?!" An exclaimed.

Yuu shrugged faintly. "I couldn't help it."

Kohane watched him, heart quietly racing.

(So much happened… behind the scenes…)

An crossed her arms, gaze sharp.
"Then why tell us now? You could've just kept quiet."

The musician hesitated, then bowed his head again.
"I thought people only cared about you because of who your dad is," he admitted. "But after seeing your performance… I knew I was wrong."

He clenched his fists.
"Your singing was incredible. It made me want to work harder—to make crowds feel the same excitement through my music." His voice wavered. "So… I'm really sorry for ruining your performance."

An studied him for a moment, then sighed.

"…Fine. Apology accepted." She pointed a finger at him. "But don't ever pull something like that again."

He nodded rapidly. "I won't!"

Footsteps retreated, leaving the space strangely quiet.

Kohane lowered her gaze. “An…”

An let out a breath. “So… those two really had nothing to do with it.”

“I can tell by your face,” Yuu said calmly.

Kohane blinked. “Eh?”

“You want to help them, Don’t you, Azusawa-san?”

“…Y-Yeah. But… I don’t know how.”

Yuu smiled—small, approving.
“You’ve really changed.”

He thought for a moment, then added, “Since I go to Kamiyama High too—and I’m classmates with Aoyagi-kun—do you want me to step in?”

Kohane’s eyes widened.

“Now that I think about it—” An suddenly leaned closer to Yuu, squinting. “Why do you always disappear during lunch? I’ve tried looking for you!”

“My secret secret spot.”

“Ah! What’s that?! Where?!”

“Nope. Not telling. Especially since you’re on the Disciplinary Committee.”

“You little—!”

“U-Um…!” Kohane interrupted hurriedly.

An and Yuu froze, then both looked at her.

Yuu softened instantly. “Alright,” he said gently. “You can count on me.”

Kohane’s eyes lit up. “Thank you, Hazuki-kun!”

An snorted. “Wow. Look at you—knight in shining armor.”

“Oh, shut it.”

— The Next Day —

Kamiyama High

The final bell rang.

Chairs scraped, voices rose, and students began packing up. Toya moved quickly, slinging his bag over his shoulder—until a voice stopped him.

“Aoyagi-kun, wait.”

He turned.

Hazuki Yuu stood there, casually holding his strap bag.

"…What is it, Hazuki-kun?"

"Wanna go on a date?"

The classroom went dead silent.

Every head snapped toward them.

Toya stared at him, baffled. "What—"

"I mean hanging out," Yuu corrected calmly.

"…Why?"

Yuu cleared his throat, "You see... I've been practicing acoustic guitar, I wanted to show you how much better I've gotten and I could ask for your advice."

Toya frowned. "You? Acoustic guitar? Since when?"

Yuu tilted his head. "I heard your father's a famous classical musician."

Silence.

Toya's fingers tightened slightly around his bag strap.

"…Fine, 'll listen once, then give you advice after that I'm leaving."

"Deal."

And with that, the two of them walked out of the classroom together—leaving behind whispers, confusion.

"By the way… remember the last time the musician cut off the music?"

Toya kept walking, his footsteps steady against the pavement.

"It seems Shiraishi-san and Azusawa-san know the truth."

No response.

They passed through the school gates, the noise of Kamiyama High fading behind them as the street opened up toward the mall.

"I know this isn't my business," Yuu continued evenly, "but… are you really not going to sing with Akito-san anymore?"

— Kamiyama Street —

Toya finally spoke.

“I have no intention of singing with Akito again,” he said. His voice was calm—too calm. “There’s no big reason behind it, though.”

Yuu glanced at him.

“But… you always look like you’re having fun when you sing with him.”

Toya stopped for half a second.

“…Fun?”

He let out a quiet, humorless breath. “Really? I look like I’m having fun?”

“Yeah.” Yuu didn’t hesitate. “You might look emotionless most of the time, but—”

A memory surfaced uninvited. (A/N: This was the time when Yuu was performing alongside VBS)

The stage lights.

The crowd.

That night before everything changed—before the update.

“But that disappears when you sing with Akito,” Yuu continued. “I can always tell. You’re different up there.”

They reached the music shop then, instruments gleaming behind glass like frozen sound.

Neither of them said anything more.

—

Inside, the familiar smell of wood and strings wrapped around them.

“Boss, I’m here for my acoustic guitar.”

“Ah! Yeah, it’s ready!”

The case was handed over, light but solid in Yuu’s hands.

“Thanks.” He turned slightly. “Come on, Aoyagi-kun. I want you to hear it.”

Toya said nothing—but he followed.

— Park —

“Good,” Yuu muttered as they arrived. “No one’s here.”

The park was quiet, with late afternoon sunlight filtering through the trees.

Wind stirred the leaves, soft enough to be mistaken for breathing.

Yuu set the guitar case down and opened it.

“Wait."

He reached out, fingers precise as he took the guitar. He adjusted the tuning with practiced ease—small movements, barely any wasted motion.

“…There,” he said, handing it back.

“Oh. Thanks.”

They sat on a bench, a comfortable distance between them.

Yuu rested the guitar on his lap.

For a moment, he didn’t play.

Then his fingers pressed down on the strings.

—♫ —♫ —♫

The first notes were simple.

Clean.

Honest.

No flashy techniques.

No attempt to impress.

Just sound.

The melody flowed gently, almost hesitant at first—like someone relearning how to speak after a long silence. It carried warmth, but there was something aching beneath it, a faint distortion that didn’t quite belong.

Toya listened.

At first, he stayed rigid. Straight-backed. Guarded.

But as the song continued, something shifted.

The rhythm steadied.

The melody climbed, then faltered—then rose again.

It reminded him of streets at dusk.

Of unfinished conversations.

Of voices that clashed yet somehow fit.

“…This song,” Toya said quietly, interrupting the music.

Yuu didn’t stop playing. “What about it?”

“It feels… unresolved.”

Yuu smiled faintly. “Yeah.”

The final chord lingered in the air long after his fingers left the strings.

Silence returned—but it wasn’t empty.

“…You’ve improved,” Toya admitted at last.

“Only because I listened,” Yuu replied. “To a lot of people.”

Toya’s gaze dropped to the ground.

“…Akito’s singing,” he said slowly, “isn’t the problem.”

Yuu didn’t respond.

“That’s why,” Toya continued, voice tightening just a little, “it’s easier not to sing at all.”

The wind rustled the leaves again.

Yuu closed the guitar case.

“…Running away doesn’t make the music disappear,” he said softly. “It just makes it echo longer.”

Toya didn’t answer.

Yuu’s fingers stilled.

The last note died unfinished, dissolving into the quiet of the park.

(Now that I think about it… anomalies only surface when despair takes root.)

(It’s now or never.)

“You keep telling yourself you’re a burden,” Yuu said quietly.

Too quietly.

“That you don’t have the resolve to stand beside him.”

Toya stiffened.

“What… are you talking about?”

Yuu rose to his feet, the bench creaking beneath the sudden absence of weight.

“Tell me, Aoyagi-kun,” he said, voice sharpening, “what are your true feelings?”

“I don’t want to sing with Akito,” Toya replied, the words spilling out like a practiced excuse. “I don’t have what it takes.”

“Wrong.”

“It’s better for me to stay where I am—”

“That’s wrong!” Yuu snapped. “Stop hiding behind that and tell me!”

He stepped closer.

Toya looked up.

Their eyes met.

“Tell me!”

(Come on, Aoyagi-kun. Say it.)

—

The park blurred.

Sound fractured.

And suddenly—

— Memory —

“Toya. Where have you been?”

His father’s voice cut cleanly through the air.

“I was… playing with a friend,” the younger Toya answered, fingers curled nervously at his sides.

“Stop wasting your time on trivial things. Go get ready. You’re practicing late again.”

“…Okay.”

—

Hours passed.

“No. Again.”

“I’m sorry—”

“Again.”

“But my fingers—”

“Doesn’t matter. You don’t stop until you can play it.”

“…Okay.”

The keys burned beneath his hands.

The strings cut into his fingertips.

Music stopped being sound—and became punishment.

—

“Mom?” His voice had been small. Hopeful. “Why can’t I play with my friends? Why do I have to practice every weekend?”

She had smiled.

Gently.

Kindly.

“You’re lucky, Toya. Not everyone gets private lessons from a top-class musician like your father. He turned down an offer overseas just to teach you. You need to work harder—to thank him.”

“….”

Lucky.

— Present —

Toya’s fists clenched.

His gaze fell to the ground, as if the earth itself were safer than looking up.

“Before I knew it,” he said, voice shaking, “I started hating music. All of it.”

Yuu didn’t interrupt.

“To get back at my dad, I quit the piano. The violin. I thought… anything he hated would be fine.” A hollow laugh escaped him. “It was childish.”

He swallowed.

“But then there was Akito.”

— Another memory —

“Hey! You wanna try singing together?”

Akito’s grin flashed through his mind—bright, unyielding.

“One day, we’re gonna put on an event even better than RAD WEEKEND!”

—

“He taught me this town,” Toya whispered.

“How to enjoy music again. He even shared his dream with me.”

His voice cracked.

“He was my first real friend.”

The wind stirred the leaves above them.

“But Akito’s always looking forward, Always chasing what’s ahead.”
His grip tightened. “If I stay beside him… I’ll just slow him down. I can’t see what he sees. Even when I’m standing right next to him.”

A breath.

“The only reason I stayed so long… was because I was afraid to face that truth.”

Silence.

“I had the weakest resolve of all.”

His shoulders sagged.

“Someone like me will only get in his way. So I decided to stop relying on him. To stop acting like a child.”

“I don’t need that crap.”

The words cut through the air like shattered glass.

Toya’s eyes snapped open.

“I want your real answer!” Yuu shouted.

“Do you have any idea why Akito made it this far?! It’s because you were there!”

Toya froze.

“You love music—so much it’s ridiculous!” Yuu continued, voice trembling with force.

“And Akito knows that better than anyone!”

“The reason he never wavered—why he could chase RAD WEEKEND at all—was because he knew you believed in him!”

Yuu stepped forward.

“He doesn’t want anyone else, Aoyagi-kun. He never did!”

The words struck like a blow to the chest.

“So tell me!” Yuu demanded.

“What do your true feelings say right now?”

His voice dropped—raw, relentless.

“Do you really not want to sing with him anymore?”

Footsteps disturbed the stillness of the park.

Three presences—close enough that the air itself seemed to tighten.

Yuu felt it before he saw them.

An.

Kohane.

And—

Akito.

(…Since when did they—?)

Yuu blinked, confusion flashing through him, before forcing himself to exhale.

(No. This is fine.)

(This is the consequence of intervening.)

(And besides…)

He glanced at Akito.

(He's the one who was meant to do this.)

(The one who breaks Aoyagi-kun's chains.)

Toya noticed them too—his breath catching mid-inhale.

"You… were listening?" he asked quietly.

Akito didn't hesitate.

He stepped forward, eyes blazing.

"Shut up and answer me."

The words hit hard—raw, unfiltered.

"What do your true feelings tell you right now?" Akito demanded. "Do you really not want to do this with me anymore?!"

He clenched his fists.

"Is there not even one part of you that wants to stand on that stage with me? If there is—then somewhere inside you, you've got the same dream I do!"

Toya's composure was finally shattered.

"Of course I want to!"

His voice cracked open, spilling everything he'd been holding back.

“You have no idea how many times I’ve thought about throwing everything else away—just to chase your dream with you!”

Akito froze.

Then—

“…Toya.”

A breath.

A pause.

“So you finally admit it.”

Akito’s shoulders relaxed, just slightly.

“If that’s what you want,” he said simply, “then do it.”

“But—”

“Nope. That’s enough.” Akito cut him off immediately. "Stop thinking so hard about every little thing.”

He stepped closer, close enough that Toya had no choice but to look at him.

“I want to work with you. You want to work with me. So let’s do it. Together.”

His voice softened—but didn’t waver.

“Isn’t that enough?”

Toya swallowed.

“…Are you really okay with that?”

“Yeah.”

“Even if my resolve is weak?”

Akito scoffed.

“Your resolve isn’t weak. You just think it is.”

He met Toya’s eyes, unwavering.

“To me, you’re the best singing partner I could ask for.”

Toya’s breath hitched.

“…Akito.”

His fists loosened.

“If that’s what you want… then go for it.” A faint, stunned laugh escaped him. “I get it now.”

His shoulders sagged—not from defeat, but relief.

“So the answer really was that simple.”

Akito smirked.

“You know, for someone who’s supposed to be smart, you’re really stupid.”

He turned, already moving forward.

“Starting tomorrow, we make up for lost time—partner. Then we’ll put on an event that blows RAD WEEKEND out of the water. Got it?”

“…Yeah.”

The word came out firm. Certain.

Behind them—

An crossed her arms, grinning.

“Well, now that that’s settled, I’m glad everything worked out.”

Akito whipped around.

“What?!”

Kohane flinched. “A-An—!”

“Stop making this more embarrassing!” Akito snapped. “We followed them here, okay?! I just had enough!”

An laughed.

“Oh, please. You were on a roll—we didn’t want to interrupt.”

She softened.

“…But yeah.”

“I’m happy for you two.”

Kohane nodded eagerly.

“Me too! Aoyagi, this means you can sing with Shinonome again!”

Toya turned to them—and then to Yuu.

“Hazuki-kun. Azusawa-san. Shiraishi-san. I’m sorry for worrying you.”

His voice was steady now.

“I’ve decided. I’m going to help Akito surpass RAD WEEKEND.”

“Hey!” An protested. “We’re the ones doing that! Don’t get ahead of yourself!”

"I support you all."

Kohane giggled.

And then—

The air trembled.

An blinked. “Did… anyone else hear that?”

Kohane stared at her phone.

“Untitled is flashing again…”

Akito stiffened. “Untitled? You guys know about that, too?!”

The screen flared white.

Light swallowed the park.

—

The world dissolved.

—

When everything settled—

Streetlights burned brighter than reality.

Music hummed beneath the pavement.

Street SEKAI.

Yuu exhaled, shoulders sagging.

“…Haah.”

He smiled faintly.

“That was exhausting.”

He looked ahead, watching the four of them step forward together.

(This way… Vivid BAD SQUAD's story is almost complete.)

“There’s only one problem…”

Yuu didn’t say it out loud—but the thought lingered like an aftertaste.

(Nagi is alive in this version.)

(They'll surpass RAD WEEKEND someday.)

(Just… not yet.)

A familiar flicker sparked above Yuu's wrist.

Glitching Miku's hologram emerged from the smartwatch, her form briefly glitching before stabilizing.

"Yuu," she said softly, "I don't see any anomalies anymore."

Yuu let out a slow breath.

"That's good, but I intervened again."

Miku tilted her head. "But it worked out, didn't it? …Yeah."

A pause.

Then—

"But Yuu, aren't you also a former member of Vivid BAD SQUAD?"

Yuu stiffened.

"Are you not going to give them their memories? Just like you did for Ichika?"

Silence.

"…No."

The word came out firm—too firm.

"I won't."

Miku's expression faltered.

"And this time, I'll remove my existence from them."

(A/N: This is why Leo/need characters haven't appeared in this arc—and won't in MMJ's either.)

Miku didn't respond right away.

"…I'm not forcing you, Yuu, but is this really what you want?"

Yuu laughed softly—empty, hollow.

"…Miku."

He turned away from her hologram, gaze fixed on the glowing streets ahead.

“They’re just game characters.”

“Nothing more.”

Miku’s eyes shimmered.

“…Is that what your feelings are telling you?”

The question lingered.

Pressed.

Yuu closed his eyes.

“…Yes.”

Chapter End Notes

> There's one more chapter for Vivid BAD SQUAD! Then, at Chapter 70 will be the start of More more jump! Welp, it's 4 am, time to sleep

Chapter 69: Vivid BAD SQUAD

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

The next day—after everything had settled.

Weekend Garage

— Yuu's Perspective —

The café bell chimed softly.

Yuu lifted his head.

"Oh? Looks like everyone's here."

"Perfect timing, Hazuki-kun!" An called out, spinning around in her chair. "Help us decide something real quick!"

"…Decide?"

"A name," she said. "We decided to team up. We all share the same goal now, right?"

Toya nodded, a genuine smile tugging at his lips—unforced, unguarded.
"Yeah. If we're doing this together, then I want it to be for real."

Akito crossed his arms, eyes sharp with familiar fire.
"If we team up, we're unbeatable. We'll surpass that night—RAD WEEKEND."

"I—I want to sing with Shinonome-kun and Aoyagi-kun too!" Kohane said quickly, her voice trembling—but steady.

"Oho?"
A teasing voice cut in as the bell rang again.

"Nagi!"
An rushed forward, throwing her arms around her immediately.

Nagi laughed, ruffling An's hair before turning to the group.
"Surpass that night, huh? You kids really think you've got the guts for it?"

"Yeah!"
All four answered at once.

Ken looked up from behind the counter, amused.
"So? What's the name of this group that plans to beat RAD WEEKEND?"

The room fell quiet.

An glanced sideways—then smiled.

“Well… we can’t decide.”

Her gaze landed squarely on Yuu.

“Hazuki-kun—since you’re the one who pulled Aoyagi out of his shell… how about you name us?”

“…Me?”

Toya nodded.
“If you hadn’t been there… I wouldn’t be here right now.”

Kohane clasped her hands together.
“I—I feel the same. If you hadn’t helped me change… I’d still be stuck regretting everything.”

“And I wouldn’t have met Kohane,” An added simply.

Yuu opened his mouth.

“But—”

“No buts,” Akito snapped. “Think. Now.”

Nagi stepped closer, studying Yuu with curious eyes before resting a hand on his shoulder.

“So it was you,” she said softly.
“The one moving things behind the scenes.”

Her grip was warm. Knowing.

“You look like a pawn,” she continued, smiling faintly.
“A pawn that somehow became everything.”

Yuu froze.

A memory surfaced—unwanted.

A voice from long ago.

“People dismiss the pawn because it’s small. Because it moves slow. Because it looks weak.”
“But the pawn is the only piece that can grow.”
“Step by step, it can become anything.”

His fingers curled.

The café waited.

“So?” An pressed. “What’s the name?”

Yuu exhaled.

“…Vivid BAD SQUAD.”

For a moment, the words hung in the air.

Then—

“That’s it!”

“I love it!”

“Yeah… it feels right.”

The name took root instantly.

And just like that—

Yuu stepped back.

Akito folded his arms, eyes flicking between the four of them.

“It can also mean a kind of stylish gang, yeah?”

Toya nodded, the name settling naturally on his tongue.

“Vivid BAD SQUAD… I like it.”

“All right, Yuu!” An grinned, pointing at him. “I knew I could count on you♪.”

“You all will surpass RAD WEEKEND,” Yuu said calmly. “I’m sure of it.”

Kohane’s shoulders stiffened, then relaxed as she smiled shyly.

“I-I don’t know about that… I’m always relying on everyone. But I’ll keep working hard—so one day I can stand beside you all properly.”

“Kohane!” An wrapped her in a sudden hug. “I’m always here for you! You’re the greatest!”

“W-Wah—A-An! I can’t breathe!”

Akito let out a long sigh, looking away.

“…Always so carefree, aren’t they?”

Toya chuckled softly.

“Being able to express yourself honestly is a good thing.”

Akito shot him a glance.

“Look who’s talking.”

Their voices blended together—arguments, laughter, plans for the future.

Four people moving forward, loud and vivid, exactly as they should be.

And quietly, just a step behind them, Yuu listened.

Near the counter, An’s father wiped a glass while Nagi leaned against the bar.

“The people in this town never change,” he said. “They sing, they clash, and then they go right back to singing.”

Nagi smiled faintly.

“I guess that’s how people like us build relationships.”

“We won’t back down,” he said.

“Of course not.”

“No,” Yuu spoke up. “They’ll surpass you.”

Both adults turned toward him.

Nagi studied him, amused.

“You sound confident, boy.”

Yuu met her gaze without hesitation.

“Yeah. One hundred percent.”

An’s father laughed quietly.

“…Now that I think about it, you look more mature than those four over there. You’re the one pulling the strings, aren’t you?”

Yuu smiled—small, unreadable.

“I guess I’m just good with strings.”

He turned and began to walk away.

“Hey,” Nagi called. “Where are you going?”

“To the next stage.”

He didn’t look back as the bell chimed and the door closed behind him.

“Huh?” An glanced around. “Where did Hazuki-kun go? I was gonna have him join us!”

Akito scoffed.

“Don’t worry about him already.”

“You shut up, Akito!”

Their voices faded into bickering laughter.

The door closed behind him.

The bell’s chime faded faster than he expected.

…So that’s that.

Yuu walked down Kamiyama Street without stopping, hands buried in his pockets, footsteps steady even as the noise from Weekend Garage melted into the distance.

Laughter.

Voices.

Music is being argued over before it even exists.

Vivid BAD SQUAD was whole now. Four people, four wills, finally aligned. The fractures had been sealed, the despair redirected, the anomaly dissolved before it could deepen.

Funny.

He’d stood beside them once—laughed with them, played with them, argued about set lists like he belonged there.

A fifth presence that never made it into the photos, never stayed long enough to be remembered.

A pawn, right?

Small.

Disposable.

Easy to move.

But pawns were never meant to stay on the board.

They were meant to advance.

To be sacrificed.

Or—if they were lucky—to reach the end and disappear as something else.

Yuu slowed his steps, glancing at his reflection in a darkened shop window.

For a moment, he didn’t recognize himself.

I didn’t choose this because I’m strong.

He clenched his fist.

I chose it because I can’t afford to be weak.

If he stayed—if he let them remember—then every laugh would hurt more than the silence. Every success would chain him to a future that wasn’t his.

They’d rely on him.

And someday… they’d break when he vanished.

Better this way.

Cleaner.

They're just game characters.

The thought came automatically.

He repeated it.

Once.

Twice.

It didn't get lighter.

They're just characters… so why does it feel like I'm abandoning real people?

His chest tightened, just slightly.

He pushed the feeling down before it could surface.

No despair.

Just as he starts walking alongside the crowds on the Scramble Crossing.

Yuu froze mid-step.

The scramble crossing roared around him—footsteps colliding, overlapping voices, the electronic chirp urging pedestrians forward—but all of it faded into static as his gaze locked onto the massive screen towering above the intersection.

"BREAKING NEWS."

The words burned white against a field of red.

ASRUN's Haruka Kiritani announces sudden retirement following a traumatic incident involving a stalker.

Yuu's breath hitched.

…What?

The screen cut to shaky footage.

Reporters crowded outside a building, microphones raised like weapons.

The ASRUN logo sat in the corner of the frame. Haruka's face never appeared—only a blurred silhouette, carefully obscured, as if reality itself was trying to censor the damage.

This isn't—This isn't supposed to happen.

The pedestrian light began to flash.

Hurry up. Hurry up. Hurry up.

Someone bumped into his shoulder, muttering an apology as they passed, but Yuu didn't move. His feet felt rooted to the asphalt, as if the city itself had tightened its grip on him.

A stalker…?

No.

That wasn't just wrong—it was impossible.

The story didn't go like this.

Haruka Kiritani didn't retire like this.

"Damn it…" he muttered under his breath, eyes still fixed on the screen as the footage looped. "Give me a break already…"

He had just finished stabilizing Vivid BAD SQUAD.

Just finished stitching one story back together.

And now—

Haruka Kiritani's name lingered in the air like a warning.

– To be continued –

Next Arc: MORE MORE JUMP

Chapter End Notes

WEYY!! 2/5 DONE!! Also, please, if you have ANY questions, ask away! Don't be shy! I opened the comment section for guests so that they can comment or ask.

Chapter 70: Dreams#1

– Minori's perspective –

Minori’s Room

Minori Hanasato lay sprawled across her bed, phone clutched tight against her chest, the ceiling blurring above her as seconds stretched far too long.

No vibration.

No chime.

“…Still nothing,” she murmured.

The room was quiet except for the faint hum of the morning outside—the distant rumble of traffic, the clink of dishes from the kitchen below. Her thumb hovered over the screen, refreshing out of habit more than hope.

I wonder if I failed again…

The thought slipped in before she could stop it, heavy and unwelcome.

“No—no, no!” Minori shot upright, shaking her head hard enough to make her ponytail whip behind her. “I can’t think like that. There’s still a chance! This time’ll be different for sure!”

She squeezed her eyes shut.

Please.

The phone buzzed.

Minori gasped, nearly dropping it as she scrambled to sit properly. Her heart slammed so hard it felt like it might break free of her ribs.

“Oh! Finally—! Please… oh, please…” Her fingers trembled as she unlocked the screen. “Here goes—!”

She inhaled sharply.

Then froze.

“…Nngh…”

The words swam before her eyes, unmistakable even as she reread them again and again.

We regret to inform you—

“R-Rejected… again…”

Her voice cracked on the last word. The phone slipped into her lap as her shoulders sagged, all the air leaving her at once.

Fifty.

This made fifty.

From downstairs, her mother's voice drifted up, brisk and gentle all at once. "Minori, your father and I are leaving soon. Don't forget to lock up."

Minori wiped at her eyes quickly, forcing brightness back into her tone. "Okay, Mom!"

She glanced at the clock.

"—Wait, is that the time?!" She bolted from the bed, the rejection already being folded away somewhere deep inside her chest. "I'm gonna be late!"

Miyamasuzaka Girls Academy — School Gate

Minori skidded to a stop just outside the gates, hands braced on her knees as she sucked in air.

"Phew… I can't believe I made it…"

Her breath fogged faintly in front of her as the morning crowd streamed past—laughing voices, hurried footsteps, the rustle of skirts and bags.

But the heaviness followed her anyway.

(Fifty rejections… I really thought I had a shot this time. I even passed the first round…)

Her shoulders tensed.

(There I go again!)

(Stop it! There's no use complaining about what's already happened!)

Minori straightened, clenching her fists at her sides.

Because she remembered.

A smiling face on a screen. A voice that had reached her on nights when giving up felt easier than dreaming.

** "Tomorrow will always be a better day! So in order to help everyone believe things can always get better… I'm here to give everyone hope for a better tomorrow!" **

"…That's right," Minori whispered, a small smile returning.

(This audition may not have worked out… but who knows what might happen next time?)

She pumped her fist into the air, eyes shining with stubborn resolve.

"All right! I just need to try harder! More, more, more!"

“Minori!”

She turned as a classmate hurried toward her, face pale and breathless.

“Did you see the news?!”

“Hm?” Minori blinked. “No, I was kinda busy this morning. Did something happen?”

The words that followed felt like they hit the world itself, not just her ears.

“They’re saying ASRUN disbanded,” the girl said. “And Haruka Kiritani is retiring from singing.”

Minori’s smile vanished.

“…Wh—What…?”

The school gates loomed behind her, unmoving.

The morning light felt suddenly colder.

“Why…?”

“Didn’t you hear?” someone whispered as they walked. “Haruka almost got kidnapped by a crazy fan.”

Minori’s steps faltered.

“…Kidnapped?”

Her friend nodded grimly, lowering her voice even further. “A stalker. That’s what everyone’s saying.”

The word lodged itself deep in Minori’s chest.

(Stalker.)

They kept walking—down the hall, up the stairs, past familiar windows and lockers—but Minori barely noticed any of it. The chatter blended into a dull roar as her thoughts spiraled.

– Class 1-A –

Chairs scraped softly against the floor as students settled into their seats. Minori slid into her own, hands clenched in her lap, eyes fixed on the desk as if it might steady her.

(ASRUN is disbanding… Haruka Kiritani is retiring.)

The words replayed again and again, relentless.

(But Haruka is the reason I kept going. She’s the reason I stood back up every time I failed. So why now?)

Minori pressed her lips together.

I don’t know what to think anymore…

A sudden ripple of noise surged from the hallway outside—voices rising, footsteps clustering.

“Hey,” someone near the door muttered, peeking out. “Doesn’t that girl in the hall look like Haruka Kiritani?”

“Huh?” another voice snapped back. “Wait—this is her! What’s she doing here?! She’s going into Class 1-C!”

Minori’s head snapped up.

“…Huh?”

Her chair scraped sharply as she stood, drawn toward the doorway before she even realized she was moving.

In the corridor, a figure stood surrounded by teachers and murmuring students.

Neat uniform. Familiar posture. A presence Minori had only ever seen through screens and spotlights.

A female teacher spoke gently but firmly. “Ms. Kiritani, are you sure you want to switch to the general education course? Given the credits you’ve already earned, you could remain in the credit-based program.”

The girl bowed slightly.

“Yes,” she replied. Her voice was calm—too calm. “I’m sure. I’m just a regular high school student now.”

The words struck harder than any headline.

Regular.

Whispers erupted instantly, swelling like a wave crashing through the hallway.

– Class 1-C –

“Settle down, everyone,” the teacher called as the noise reluctantly died. “We have a new student joining us today. Ms. Kiritani, would you please introduce yourself?”

She stepped forward.

“My name is Haruka Kiritani,” she said. “I was enrolled here during junior high, but I haven’t really attended classes since starting high school because of work. However, I recently decided to quit in order to return to school and finish my education.”

She bowed again, polite and composed.

“It’s nice to meet you all.”

The world tilted.

“H-Haruka…?” Minori breathed. “No way…”

Excited voices burst out immediately.

“This is crazy! It’s really her!”
“Did she retire just to come back to school?”
“Or is this to cover up the stalker thing?”

“That’s not fair!” another student complained. “Why couldn’t she be in our class?!”

Minori couldn’t hear them clearly anymore.

Her chest felt tight. Too tight.

The Haruka standing there—quiet, unadorned, stripped of the stage—didn’t match the image Minori had clung to for years. The smiling idol who promised brighter tomorrows. The light that never wavered.

If even Haruka can be broken…

The thought split her straight down the middle.

“Urgh…” Minori pressed a hand to her chest. “I can’t stand it… I feel like I’m splitting in two…”

Her friend grabbed her arm, alarmed. “Y-You’re going to split in two?! Minori, are you all right?”

Minori didn’t answer.

Because somewhere between the idol she adored and the girl standing in Class 1-C, something inside her had begun to crack—and she didn’t yet know which half she was supposed to follow.

“S-Sorry…” Minori forced a weak smile as her classmate steadied her. “I’m just… really overwhelmed right now. I don’t know how to feel.”

Her gaze drifted, unfocused, back toward the classroom door.

(Seeing Haruka right here… Seeing her so close—so real—almost makes it easier to accept that she retired…)

The image of the stage—lights, cheers, unwavering smiles—faded, replaced by a girl in a school uniform, standing beneath fluorescent lights like anyone else.

(Still…I guess even Haruka had to be a regular girl once, before she became an idol.)

Minori exhaled slowly.

For a moment, she said nothing.

Then, quietly—

(Haruka gave me so much hope for tomorrow. I was always the one receiving it. But she’s already given me more than enough.)

Her fingers curled into fists.

(Now it’s my turn.)

If this was the path Haruka had chosen—if stepping away from the stage was what she needed—then Minori would respect it. Even if it hurt.

(I'll support her. Even if it's only in my heart.)

"…Right," Minori whispered.

Her eyes sharpened, resolve settling in like a steady flame.

(I can't hide from this. I have to accept the choice Haruka made. And maybe… someday…)

Someday, she'd stand on the other side of that promise.

(I'll take all the hope Haruka gave me… And I'll pass it on.)

"I'll just have to work more and more," Minori said softly, almost smiling, "to become the kind of idol who can do that."

The school bell rang, sharp and final, slicing the moment in two.

– After School –

Excited voices filled the hallway as lockers slammed shut.

"Hey," a student said brightly, "let's see if Haruka wants to walk home with us! We can ask her what it's like being a celebrity!"

Another shook her head. "We shouldn't. Nobody just stops being famous for no reason. I bet it's something she doesn't want to talk about."

Haruka lingered near the edge of the crowd, fingers tightening around her bag strap.

(I knew this would happen…) she thought, eyes flicking toward the exits. (Still…)

Her gaze lifted toward the stairwell.

(I wonder if there's somewhere quiet.)

– Miyamasuzaka Girls Academy — Rooftop –

The rooftop door creaked open, letting in the afternoon air.

"All right," Minori said to herself, stretching her arms. "Today was… a lot."

The city hummed beyond the fence, distant and constant.

"But it's time to pull myself together and get back to practice!"

She pulled out her phone, scrolling through her playlist.

"I usually stick to ASRUN songs, but…" Her thumb paused. "I think I'll go with a Miku song today. Her lyrics always cheer me up!"

The door squeaked again.

Minori turned.

“Oh—”

The girl standing there froze as well, eyes widening just slightly.

“…Oh.”

“H-Haruka?!” Minori blurted, heart, jumping into her throat.

The quiet rooftop suddenly felt much, much smaller.

“Oh—sorry,” Haruka said softly, shifting her weight near the door. “I didn’t mean to bother you, um…”

Minori snapped to attention so fast her posture nearly knocked the air from her lungs.

“Oh! M-M-M—My name is Minori Hanasato!” she blurted, bowing far too deeply. “Class 1-A, student number twenty-one! My favorite hobby is imitating dance choreography, and my special skill is coming up with catchphrases!”

The words tumbled out in one breath.

Haruka blinked.

“…Huh?”

(Oh no!)
(I got so nervous I introduced myself like I do at auditions!)

Minori’s face burned as she straightened, hands clenched at her sides.

Then—soft laughter.

“Heh.” Haruka’s shoulders relaxed just a little. “I guess that means we’re in the same year.”

She offered a small, polite smile. “I’m Haruka Kiritani. I just transferred into Class C today.”

Her gaze drifted toward the far corner of the rooftop, where the wind stirred loose papers near the fence.

“I was looking for somewhere quiet to read. Is it all right if I stay here for a while?”

“O-Of course!” Minori said immediately, nodding far too many times.

(It’s really her…)

(She looks smaller in person. But there’s still something about her—like she’s glowing, even without the lights.)

Her heart raced.

(We’re… breathing the same air right now…)

Haruka stepped further onto the rooftop, the door clicking shut behind her.

For a moment, she said nothing.

Minori watched her closely—and the glow she'd imagined wavered.

(She looks tired… Really tired.)

Haruka's complexion was pale, shadows lingering beneath her eyes. The kind that didn't come from late-night studying, but from sleepless nights where rest never truly came.

(Is it because of the incident? Or… everyone here?)

Minori swallowed.

(I can't blame her. Being stared at all day… whispered about… It must've been exhausting.)

She glanced at her phone, still open to her playlist.

(Maybe I should skip practice today. It's hard to read with music and footsteps, and noise.)

Haruka's voice broke the silence.

"What were you doing up here, Hanasato?"

"M-Me?!" Minori squeaked. "I—I was doing some dance practice!"

She waved her hands quickly. "Oh! But not for the dance club or anything! I'm just—um—I'm hoping to be an idol one day!"

The words slipped out before she could stop them.

"J-Just like you, Haruka!"

Haruka stiffened.

"…Huh?"

Her eyes widened, just slightly.

"I—Idol…?"

The wind passed between them, carrying the distant sounds of the city below—cheers that no longer belonged to her, dreams that still burned fiercely in the girl standing in front of her.

The silence that followed wasn't awkward.

It was fragile.

Like one wrong word might shatter it.

Just then—

"Just tell it to me straight!"

Minori flinched, shoulders jumping. “Eep—! I-It sounds like someone’s yelling…”

“I’m not letting you leave until you talk to me! Now hurry up, will you?!”

The sharpness of the voice cut through the air, echoing across the rooftop stairwell.

Haruka’s gaze shifted toward the door. “Sounds like an argument,” she said quietly. “And it looks like they’re heading this way.”

Minori winced. Seriously? Now?

“Haruka finally found somewhere to relax, and now this…” she muttered. Then, panicking, she grabbed Haruka’s sleeve. “T-They might not notice us if we hide behind the water tank! Haru— I mean—Kiritani! This way!”

“Oh—sure.” Haruka let herself be pulled along, blinking in surprise. “Huh?”

They ducked behind the large metal tank just as footsteps thudded up the stairs.

The rooftop door creaked open.

Haruka peeked out first.

“…Is that Shizuku?”

Minori blinked. “What? You know Hinomori?”

“I’ve met her a few times through work,” Haruka replied softly.

“Oh!” Minori nodded rapidly. “That makes sense! She’s the lead of Cheerful*Days, after all! I remember—you even did a show together!”

“I believe the other girl is Airi Momoi,” Haruka added, eyes narrowing slightly. “From QT. She used to appear on a lot of variety programs.”

“Yeah…” Minori hesitated. “But she quit about six months ago. It’s kind of a shame. She seemed really popular.”

Haruka exhaled slowly.

“I chose this school because of the convenience of its credit-based course,” she said, voice thoughtful, “but I didn’t realize there were so many others from the entertainment industry here as well.”

“I-I suppose you’re right, Ms. Kiritani!” Minori nodded eagerly.

(Oh my gosh… I can’t believe I’m having an actual conversation with Haruka…)

Haruka glanced at her and smiled faintly. “You know, we’re in the same grade. There’s no need to be so formal.”

She paused. “Do you mind if I call you Minori?”

Minori’s brain short-circuited.

“W-What? Oh—uh—R-Right! Sure! Haruka!”

(I can’t believe this—did I just use up the rest of my lifetime’s worth of luck?!)

Haruka turned her attention back to the voices nearby. “I wonder what those two are fighting about.”

Airi’s voice rang out, sharp and impatient.

“Shizuku, I heard something from an old friend of mine. There’s a rumor that you haven’t been getting along with your group—and that you’re thinking of transferring.”

Shizuku fell silent.

“…Is that true?” Airi pressed.

“Well…” Shizuku hesitated.

“Spit it out already!” Airi snapped. “Being indecisive is the worst thing in our line of work! Fans pick up on it—they get worried!”

“I know,” Shizuku said quietly. “It’s just…”

Haruka straightened.

“I get the feeling this may take a while,” she murmured. “Might as well go out and deal with this now.”

“Huh?” Minori whispered—but Haruka was already stepping out from behind the tank.

“Who’s there?!” Airi spun around. “—Wait. ASRUN’s Haruka Kiritani?! You’re a student here too?!”

Shizuku’s eyes widened. “Haruka…? Wait—how are you? I heard about the incident.”

For a moment, Haruka said nothing.

Then, evenly: “Hi, Shizuku. Long time no see. I don’t think I’ve seen you since we recorded together last year.”

“Hey!” Airi snapped. “We’re trying to have a private conversation here! What’s the big idea eavesdropping?!”

“Eavesdrop?” Haruka replied coolly. “You’re the one who assumed nobody was up here and started yelling loudly enough for everyone to hear.”

“Wha—?!”

“Don’t worry,” Haruka continued. “I have no intention of telling anyone what I just heard. I may have quit, but I still know when to keep my mouth shut.”

Airi bristled. “Y-You big-shot idols always act so high and mighty! This is exactly why I hate dealing with them!” She huffed. “…Whatever. As long as you keep this to yourself! Don’t go

blabbing to your friends, either!”

“O-Of course!” Minori squeaked from behind Haruka. “I-I won’t tell anyone!”

“Good,” Airi said curtly. “Then you can go now. We still have things to discuss.”

“B-But…” Minori hesitated.

“What?” Airi shot her a look. “You still have something to say?”

Haruka stepped slightly forward. “It’s pretty rude to suddenly show up and tell everyone else to leave. She was here first, you know.”

Airi blinked. “Huh?”

“You’re the ones interrupting her dance practice,” Haruka added calmly.

“…Dance practice?” Airi echoed. “By herself? What for?”

Minori swallowed hard, then squared her shoulders.

“Well—um—I’m practicing to become an idol!”

Airi stared. “…You? An idol?”

“Y-Yes!” Minori said, voice shaking—but firm. “It’s my dream to be an idol!”

The rooftop fell quiet.

Not with disbelief.

But with the kind of silence that comes right before something changes.

“You want to be an idol?” Airi crossed her arms, eyes sharp. “Are you serious?”

“Y-Yes!” Minori nodded quickly. “I’m practicing for an audition right now!”

“And where is this audition?” Airi asked flatly.

“Oh—um—I was planning to audition for MoriPro next!”

“MoriPro?” Airi barked a short laugh. “That’s a major talent agency. Do you have any idea how low their acceptance rate is?! An amateur like you would be lucky to even pass the initial screening!”

Minori’s mouth opened, then closed. “I… uh…”

Airi tilted her head. “What’s your name?”

“M-Minori Hanasato.”

“How many auditions have you taken so far?” Airi pressed. “And how’d you do?”

Minori’s fingers twisted in the hem of her skirt.

“I’ve applied about… fifty times,” she admitted. “I passed the initial application screening three times, but… I haven’t gotten any further than that yet…”

Airi sighed, rubbing her temples.

“And you honestly think you have a chance at MoriPro?” she said. “I doubt you’d even make it with the smaller agencies.”

Minori’s voice trembled—but she lifted her head anyway.

“S-Still… I want to try harder! If I dedicate myself, I’m sure I can do it!” She clenched her fists. “More, more, more!”

Haruka watched in silence.

Airi scoffed. “That’s it? Things don’t just happen because you really want them to!”

“Huh…?”

“You’d be better off giving up now,” Airi continued bluntly. “You don’t seem like the idol type.”

Minori’s breath caught. “H-How can you say that…?”

“Airi,” Shizuku said softly. “Stop.”

Airi shot her a look. “What?”

“You shouldn’t deny someone’s dreams like that,” Shizuku said. Her voice didn’t rise—but it didn’t waver either. “You may not be working right now, but you’re still an idol. Someone who’s supposed to give people hope.”

Airi stiffened.

“I don’t like it when you say things like that,” Shizuku added quietly.

“…I know,” Airi muttered, looking away. “I really do…”

Haruka said nothing.

Minori took a shaky breath.

“Even so,” she said, voice small but steady, “I’m still going to give it my best!”

“And I’m telling you that won’t matter!” Airi snapped.

“Well…” Minori pressed a hand to her chest. “I have faith!”

“Faith?”

Minori’s eyes shone.

“Tomorrow will always be a better day!” she said. “So in order to help everyone believe things can always get better… I’m here to give everyone hope for a better tomorrow!”

The words rang across the rooftop.

Haruka froze.

Her eyes widened, breath hitching.

“That’s…” she whispered.

(What I said.)

The wind stirred, carrying the echo of a promise Haruka thought she’d already left behind—now reflected back at her by a girl who still believed in it with her whole heart.

“And that’s why I’m never giving up, no matter the odds!” Minori’s voice rang out across the rooftop, fierce and unshakable. “I will keep giving more until I pass! More, more!”

A soft, lilting laugh floated through the air.

Minori froze. “Huh?”

Airi’s eyes snapped toward the source. “Wh-Who was that?! Is someone else up here?!”

Minori looked down at her phone just as a faint glow spread across the screen.

Huh? Her phone lit up… and the air shimmered.

Before them, a hologram flickered into existence—a small, cheerful figure with turquoise hair and a radiant smile.

Minori’s jaw dropped. “Huh?! A… hologram of… Miku?!”

The figure twirled slightly, light bouncing off her virtual form. “

Haruka’s brow furrowed. “What’s going on? Is Miku… talking to us right now? And how does she know our names?”

The hologram giggled. “

Shizuku tilted her head, perplexed. “A world… born from our feelings?”

” Miku replied. “

Minori’s eyes widened. “With your moves? Oh!” She bounced slightly on her heels, caught between excitement and disbelief.

The hologram spun gracefully. “

Airi blinked, crossing her arms. “Wh-What was that? Some kind of new ad?”

Shizuku’s lips pressed together. “It feels… strange. Actually speaking with Miku like that. Almost like she’s really here.”

Minori swallowed hard, trying to steady her racing heart. “U-Um, excuse me!”

Airi frowned. “What now?”

“O-Oh, um…” Minori stumbled over her words, cheeks flushed. “I just… that Miku advertisement… Or was it an advertisement? Anyway, what she said… it made me think, um…”

Shizuku’s voice was gentle. “Are you all right? Try not to be so nervous.”

“Oh, right!” Minori inhaled deeply, then exhaled slowly. “Breathe in… breathe out… Sorry about that. It’s just…” Her eyes flicked to the older idols, her hands clenched into fists. “I have a favor to ask. If it’s not too much trouble… could you help me practice?!”

Airi’s eyes went wide. “What?!”

“And why on earth would we want to help you practice?!” Airi shot back, arms crossed tightly over her chest.

Minori flinched—but she didn’t step back.

“I-I know we’ve only just met…” she said, bowing instinctively. “And I know I don’t really have the right to ask something like this.”

She straightened, fingers trembling as she clenched them into fists.

“I’ve been practicing singing and dancing all by myself until now. There’s still so much I don’t understand… so much I’m doing wrong.” Her voice wavered, but didn’t break. “I thought that if I could learn from such great idols like you—even a little—it might help me get closer to my dream.”

Her eyes shone.

“I want to keep improving. More, more!” she said softly. “So I can become an idol. Please…”

Silence fell.

Shizuku watched her for a long moment, unreadable.

Then—

“…I’ll help.”

Airi spun around. “Shizuku?!”

Shizuku met Minori’s gaze, her smile gentle but sincere. “You said your name was Minori, right?”

Minori nodded rapidly.

“I’m usually busy with work,” Shizuku continued, “so I can only help on my days off. Would that be all right?”

Minori’s breath hitched.

“Y-Yes! Of course!” She bowed again, deeper this time. “Thank you so much!”

Airi groaned. “What are you thinking? What about your own work?”

Shizuku turned to her, expression calm. “You’re the one who said it, Airi.”

She paused. “Idols should never ignore people who dream of becoming idols themselves.”

Airi fell quiet.

Her shoulders slumped slightly. “…Tch.”

She sighed, long and heavy. “Fine. All I have to do is give a little advice, right?” She jabbed a finger toward Minori. “But if you fail your next audition, I’m out. You got that?!”

Minori snapped to attention. “R-Right!” Her voice rang with earnest determination. “Th-Thank you very much!”

Haruka, who had remained silent throughout, watched the scene unfold—eyes lingering on Minori’s bowed head, on Shizuku’s kindness, on Airi’s reluctant compromise.

And somewhere deep inside her, a thought she hadn’t allowed herself to voice yet began to stir.

So this is what it looks like…

When a dream refuses to die.

Students passed by in loose clusters, laughter rising and falling like waves, the ordinary rhythm of after school unfolding around them.

“That’s great, Minori,” Haruka said as they walked side by side. “I’m glad they agreed to help you practice.”

“Yeah!” Minori beamed, her steps light. “Though… I’m sorry you never really got to sit down and read, Haruka. And um—what was with that Miku video earlier?”

Haruka let out a small breath. “I have no idea. It really was strange.” She glanced up at the sky. “Actually… this entire day has been rather strange.”

Then, gently, “So—you want to be an idol, huh?”

“Yeah!” Minori laughed softly, rubbing the back of her neck. “Hehe… It feels a little weird telling you that, though.”

She looked ahead, then gathered her courage.

“You’re actually the reason I wanted to become an idol in the first place, Haruka.”

Haruka stopped walking.

The noise of the street seemed to dull, as if someone had turned the volume down.

“….”

Her mind betrayed her.

Lights.
Cheers.

A sea of glowsticks swaying in perfect unison.

And then—

That moment.

The fear.
The screaming.
Hands reaching where they shouldn't have been.

Haruka's fingers curled unconsciously.

She shook her head, as if to scatter the memory before it could settle.

Minori didn't notice—or pretended not to.

"My dream," Minori continued earnestly, "is to take all the hope you've given me and pass it on to even more people."

She clenched her fists, eyes shining.

"That's why I need to practice. Especially now that I finally have some coaches!" She laughed, pumping her fist. "More, more!"

"I see…" Haruka said quietly.

They resumed walking.

For a few moments, the conversation drifted—small things, harmless things. School. Music. The weather.

Then—

Thump.

Haruka staggered slightly as someone brushed hard against her shoulder.

"Ah—sorry!" a man said quickly, turning back.

"N-No, it's alright," Haruka replied automatically. "Please be careful next time."

The man paused.

"…Huh?"

His eyes narrowed, focusing.

"Are you… Kiritani Haruka from ASRUN?"

Haruka's breath caught.

Minori felt it instantly—the change in the air. The way Haruka's posture stiffened, shoulders tightening just a fraction too late.

Around them, footsteps slowed.

Whispers began.

“Did you hear that?”
“ASRUN…?”
“Isn’t that—”

Haruka forced a polite smile.

The sun felt harsher now.

The moment shattered.

“Can I get an autograph?!”
“Haruka, over here!”
“Just one picture—please!”

People surged in from every direction, voices stacking over one another until they blurred into noise. Phones were already raised, lenses glinting in the afternoon light.

Haruka froze.

Her breath shortened. The street tilted, shrinking until there was nowhere to step back.

“U-Um! Excuse me!” Minori tried, pushing gently at first, then harder. “P-Please give her some space—!”

No one listened.

The crowd pressed closer, closing the gap between bodies. Minori felt herself pushed sideways, then backward, the warmth of Haruka’s presence slipping out of reach.

“H-Haruka—!”

She was swallowed by the movement, hands brushing past her shoulders, voices drowning her out.

Then—

“Excuse me!”

The voice cut through—clear, firm, unmistakably calm.

A hand closed around Minori’s wrist. Not rough. Not hesitant.

“Please—grab her hand!”

The boy’s grip was steady as he pulled her forward. Instinct took over.

Minori reached.

Her fingers found Haruka’s.

She held on.

The crowd protested—shouts, startled yelps—as Minori was tugged back the way she'd come, dragging Haruka with her. They slipped through a narrow opening, momentum carrying them forward until the noise dulled behind them.

They didn't stop until they'd cleared the street.

Panting, Minori bent over slightly, hands on her knees.

Haruka leaned against a railing, chest rising and falling too fast.

"…Are you two okay?"

Minori looked up.

The boy stood a short distance away, watching them carefully, eyes sharp but expression gentle—like he'd already checked the exits, already made sure they weren't followed.

"Y-Yes!" Minori said quickly. "Thank you—thank you so much!"

"I-I'm fine as well," Haruka added, bowing reflexively before straightening. "Thank you."

She studied him.

(Huh…? He feels… familiar.)

"No need for formalities," he said. "I'm just glad I could help."

"Oh—!" Minori straightened, suddenly flustered. "B-By the way! I'm Minori Hanasato!"

He paused, then nodded. "Yuu Hazuki."

Haruka's breath hitched.

(…Yuu... Hazuki?)

Her eyes widened, something old and unresolved stirring at the name—like a melody she couldn't quite place, but knew she'd heard before.

Chapter 71: Leave it to him

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

“And… this is probably…” the boy hesitated, eyes flicking between them, measuring his words, “…Kiritani Haruka?”

“Y-Yes!” Minori answered quickly, nodding a little too hard. She tightened her grip just a fraction and turned to Haruka. “Are you okay, Haruka?”

“I—I’m fine."

But her voice was softer now. Thinner. Like it might tear if pushed.

Her fingers, Minori noticed—were cold.

Yuu watched her for a moment longer than politeness required.

He didn’t stare.

Didn’t ask questions.

Didn’t look like a fan at all.

He just noticed—the shallow breaths, the tension held too carefully in her shoulders, the way her gaze kept drifting toward the street they’d escaped from.

“…Hold on,”

Haruka looked up. “Huh?”

“Stay here. I’ll be right back.”

Before either of them could ask what he meant, he was already moving—jogging down the sidewalk, slipping into the flow of pedestrians with an ease that felt practiced, deliberate. In seconds, he blended into the crowd as if he’d never been there at all.

Minori watched him disappear, then turned back to Haruka.

“It’s okay,” she said gently, squeezing her hand. “He helped us back there. I think he’s… nice.”

Haruka didn’t answer right away.

She nodded instead.

Minutes passed—quiet ones.

The city resumed its rhythm around them: footsteps, distant laughter, the hum of traffic. Haruka focused on breathing, slow and measured, grounding herself in the warmth of Minori’s hand.

Then—

“Phew…”

Yuu reappeared, slightly out of breath, holding out a cold bottle of water.

“Here.”

Haruka blinked, momentarily caught off guard.

“…Th—thank you.”

She accepted it with both hands. The chill seeped into her palms, real and grounding. She twisted the cap, took a careful sip.

The tightness in her chest eased—just a little.

Yuu stepped back, giving her space without being asked.

“No rush,” he said quietly. “Crowds like that… they don’t fade immediately.”

Haruka looked at him again—really looked this time.

The familiarity returned, sharper now. Not recognition exactly. More like a sense of overlap—as if their paths had brushed against each other somewhere she couldn’t quite remember.

“…You’re very calm,” she said.

Yuu shrugged. “You get used to watching exits.”

Minori tilted her head. “That’s… kind of a strange thing to say.”

Yuu smiled faintly—but there was something distant behind it.

“Yeah,” he replied. “I get that a lot.”

The afternoon light dipped lower, casting long shadows across the pavement.

Yuu rubbed the back of his neck, suddenly aware of how long the silence had lingered between them—too long to be natural, too short to ignore.

“By the way… uhh,” he said, voice light but measured, “I’m a Kamiyama High student. Second year.”

Minori’s eyes lit up. “Oh! We go to Miyamasuzaka.”

“Ohhh,” Yuu replied, nodding once. “The all-girls school.”

“Yeah!”

Haruka glanced back at him, curiosity flickering beneath her practiced composure. “Kamiyama High… I’ve heard good things about it.”

“Yeah, well, it's … quiet. Most days.”

The way he said it stripped the word of warmth—no pride, no complaint. Just an observation, like noting the weather.

Minori tilted her head, studying him more openly now. “You don’t really act like most students I know.”

Yuu raised an eyebrow slightly. “That’s not a compliment, is it?”

“N–No! I mean—!” Minori flailed for half a second before laughing at herself, cheeks flushing. “I just meant you’re really calm. Like… really calm.”

Haruka nodded in agreement.

“You didn’t panic, not even when people surrounded us.”

Yuu’s gaze drifted away, settling on the curve of the street where the crowd had dispersed, as if he were watching echoes rather than people.

“…Panicking doesn’t help anyone, especially not the person being surrounded.”

There was something in his tone—an absence of bravado, a certainty that felt learned rather than assumed.

Haruka’s fingers tightened around the water bottle. The plastic creaked softly under the pressure.

Kamiyama High.

Second year.

And that name again.

Yuu Hazuki.

The sensation returned—stronger now. Not recognition, but resonance. Like a half-remembered melody hovering just beyond reach.

“…Hazuki-kun,” she said slowly, testing the name as if it might unlock something. “Have we… met before?”

Yuu froze.

It lasted less than a heartbeat. A fractional stillness—shoulders pausing, breath catching somewhere between inhale and exhale.

Then he smiled.

Small. Polite. Perfectly placed.

“I don’t think so, But… people tell me that sometimes.”

Minori blinked. “Really?”

“Yeah.”

Haruka didn’t answer.

Yuu took a small step back, slipping his hands into his pockets—not hurried, but deliberate, like someone drawing a line beneath the moment.

“Anyway… I’ll be heading out now,” he said. “Nice to meet you, Hanasato-san. Kiritani-san.”

“Y–Yeah! Nice to meet you too!” Minori replied at once, lifting her free hand in an enthusiastic wave. “See you!”

Yuu returned it with a brief nod, already turning away.

Haruka didn’t speak.

Not a word. Not even a sound.

Yuu paused—just half a step, barely enough to notice. As if he felt the absence behind him, heavy and unspoken.

Then he kept walking.

Haruka bowed, the motion instinctive, almost delayed—like the echo of a habit rather than a conscious choice.

Minori watched his back until it vanished into the flow of the street, swallowed whole by Miyamasuzaka’s after-school crowd.

“…Huh,” she murmured. “He really just disappeared.”

Haruka straightened slowly.

Her fingers were still wrapped around the water bottle. The plastic had long since warmed to her touch, the chill gone—but she didn’t loosen her grip.

“That guy is interesting, huh… right, Haruka?” Minori said, turning to her with a small smile.

Haruka didn’t answer right away.

Her gaze lingered on the empty stretch of sidewalk where Yuu had been only moments ago, as if expecting the air itself to ripple and give something back.

“…Yeah,” she said at last.

But her voice lacked certainty.

Interesting wasn’t the word she would have chosen.

There was something about him—something quiet and distant, like a song you’d once heard on a stage you could never return to. Familiar without memory. Comforting without warmth.

Haruka lowered her eyes to the bottle in her hands.

— The Next Day —

The rooftop was bathed in pale afternoon light, the concrete still warm beneath their feet. A faint breeze carried the distant hum of the city below, softened by height and sky.

“Hinomori! Momoi! Thank you so much for coming!”

Minori bowed so deeply she nearly tipped forward, springing back up with a grin that radiated pure enthusiasm.

Shizuku laughed softly. “Hehe. Hi, Minori. We’ll do our best to help however we can.”

Airi crossed her arms, eyes already scanning Minori from head to toe. “I trust you’ve already warmed up with some stretches?”

“Yes! I wanted to make sure I didn’t waste any time! I’m all ready to go!”

“…At least you’ve got the right attitude,” Airi muttered. Then her gaze shifted. “One question, though. What is Haruka Kiritani doing reading over there?”

Minori followed her line of sight. Haruka sat near the fence, a paperback resting in her hands, posture relaxed but distant.

“She said she likes it here because it’s quiet. Not many people come up here.”

Airi scoffed. “Dance practice isn’t exactly a quiet activity, you know.” She sighed. “Which reminds me—how are you with interviews? Initial screenings aren’t about dance skills. They’re about that.”

“I-I know! I’ve got that part down!”

“Oh?” Airi arched a brow. “Then let’s hear how you’d start.”

Minori stiffened, inhaled sharply. “R-Right! Hi, my name is Minori Hanasato! My favorite hobby is imitating dance choreography and my special skill is coming up with catchphrases! I thought up a new one today—like the seed of a dream which grows into a flower, I’m Minori Hanasato♪ It’s wonderful to meet you!”

Silence.

Airi clicked her tongue. “Two.”

“…Huh?”

“Out of a hundred.”

“A two?! What did I do wrong?!”

“You told me nothing about who you are,” Airi shot back. “And that catchphrase? Made zero sense.”

“Urgh…”

“You’re supposed to show your strong points,” Airi continued. “If it were me, I’d talk about variety shows. Handling sudden, ridiculous requests. Things people actually remember.”

Minori's eyes sparkled. "That's true! You've been on so many variety shows! I loved watching you banter with the other guests!"

Shizuku fell quiet, watching Airi instead.

"As long as the audience thinks so," Airi said flatly, "that's what matters."

Minori hesitated. "…I'm not really sure what my strong points are."

"From what I've seen?" Airi smirked. "That annoying tenacity of yours."

"My tenacity? But… doesn't everyone work hard?"

"You'd be surprised," Shizuku said gently. "A lot of people can't keep going on their own. Failing fifty times and still standing up—that's a story people remember."

"I-I guess that makes sense!"

"Then we're skipping dance today," Airi decided. "Interview practice only."

Minori stiffened. "R-Right!"

"And we're not stopping until you can do it perfectly."

—

Later, the sun dipped lower as Airi and Shizuku walked side by side down the street.

"She's stubborn," Airi said. "I might even enjoy teasing her more than you."

Shizuku smiled. "It reminds me of when I first joined. You were so strict."

"This is nothing," Airi replied. Then she slowed. "…Hey. About what we talked about the other day…"

Shizuku waited.

"…Never mind," Airi muttered. "It's been a long day. See you tomorrow."

"Yeah. See you tomorrow, Airi."

Their footsteps parted.

"Shizuku—"

She turned—

"Hey, isn't that Airi Momoi?"

Her breath hitched.

"The one from all those variety shows?"

"Yeah! She used to be an idol, right?"

“…Whatever. Let’s go talk to her!”

Airi’s pulse spiked.

Not now.

She turned sharply—

—and vanished.

“What? Where’d she go?”

Cold hands pulled her back into an alley.

“Mmm?!”

“Be quiet,” a boy whispered, firm hand over her mouth. “They’ll notice.”

(Who is he?! A stalker—?!)

Her heart slammed against her ribs.

Then—voices faded.

“…Guess she left.”

Footsteps retreated.

The hand loosened.

Airi didn’t hesitate.

She twisted and kicked.

“—Agh! Hey?!”

She spun, eyes blazing. “Who are you?!”

“H-Huh?! I just—saved you, didn’t I?!”

“I don’t need saving!” she snapped, fists clenched. “Do you have any idea how creepy that was?!”

“…If they’d found you,” the boy said quietly, rubbing his shin, “you’d be swarmed. Like a fish surrounded by bait.”

She froze.

That wording.

That calm.

“…You,” she said sharply. “What’s your name?”

“…Yuu Hazuki.”

Airi’s eyes narrowed.

"Why do I feel like you insulted my name just now."

Airi scoffed, arms crossing tightly over her chest as she leaned back against the alley wall.

“Tch. Don’t get ahead of yourself,” she shot back. “Your name’s fine. Your timing, on the other hand? Absolute garbage.”

She looked him up and down—quick, sharp, assessing. The kind of stare honed by years under cameras and spotlights.

“Do you have any idea how close you were to getting punched twice?” she continued. “You don’t grab a girl and drag her into an alley and then expect a thank-you.”

Yuu let out a small breath, almost amused. “Fair. I’ll admit that was… poorly executed.”

“Poorly executed?” Airi echoed, incredulous. “That’s what you call it?!”

Then she paused.

Her eyes narrowed slightly, something clicking into place.

"Well... Fine... Thank you."

"N-No problem."

“…You’re welcome,” he said after a beat.

The alley exhaled into silence.

What remained was the distant murmur of traffic, the buzz of neon signs overhead, and the faint echo of footsteps retreating back into the city. Airi clicked her tongue and pushed herself off the wall, posture sharp, guarded—every movement practiced from years of being watched.

“Don’t misunderstand,” she snapped, jabbing a finger lightly against his chest. “I’m thanking you for the result. Not the method.”

“Duly noted.”

She scowled, clearly displeased by how little that bothered him. “You’re really annoying, you know that?”

“I get that a lot,” Yuu replied, calm to the point of indifference.

That, more than anything, seemed to irritate her.

“Tch. Whatever.” She turned away, already halfway done with the conversation. “I’m out of here.”

Her footsteps echoed once… twice… then vanished into the noise of the street.

— Yuu’s perspective –

He didn’t move right away.

Instead, he leaned back against the cool brick wall, letting the tension finally drain from his shoulders.

A dull ache pulsed where her kick had landed—nothing serious, but sharp enough to remind him it had happened.

"…Yeah," he muttered under his breath. "That kind of hurts. Both mentally and physically."

The air shifted.

Not audibly.

Not visibly.

But he felt it—like a page turning somewhere just behind his eyes.

Stage SEKAI — Unlocked

The sensation settled deep in his chest, heavy and undeniable.

He closed his eyes briefly, letting out a slow breath.

So that's how it happens, he thought. Not applause. Not music. Conflict. Pressure.

His mind flicked back through the pattern.

School SEKAI — unlocked through coincidence, familiarity, routine, and especially Ichika.

Street SEKAI — unlocked because of Kohane's strong feelings

And now this.

Stage SEKAI.

"…Lucky me," he murmured dryly.

He straightened, pushing off the wall, hands sliding back into his pockets as his thoughts continued to spiral.

I already knew this would be a problem.

MORE MORE JUMP.

Three celebrities. Three public figures. Three walking disasters for someone who wanted to stay unnoticed.

And somehow, against all probability, he'd already crossed paths with them.

Haruka Kiritani.

Airi Momoi.

Shizuku Hinomori.

Too many spotlights.

Too many eyes.

He glanced toward the alley's exit, where Airi had disappeared moments ago.

"…At this rate," he said quietly, "luck's just another word for inconvenience."

He tapped his smartwatch.

"Miku," he murmured, voice low and steady, "let's go meet… the idols of Stage SEKAI."

The device pulsed once—soft, responsive.

With a practiced motion, Yuu swiped through the air. Light unfolded at his fingertips, forming the familiar Project SEKAI UI: translucent panels, icons hovering in neat arcs, data scrolling just fast enough to feel alive.

The world around him dimmed, as if reality itself had politely stepped back.

SEKAI.

His finger paused for a fraction of a second.

"…There it is."

Stage SEKAI.

He tapped.

The alley dissolved—not shattering, not tearing, but unraveling. Neon lights stretched into threads. Concrete softened into color. Sound drained away until all that remained was a single, weightless hush.

And then—

Warmth.

Yuu felt it first on his skin, like sunlight filtered through petals. When he opened his eyes, the world had changed completely.

A vast flower garden spread before him.

Endless rows of blossoms swayed gently in a breeze that carried the scent of sweetness and spring —roses, lilies, daisies, flowers he couldn't even name.

Colors layered over one another in soft gradients: pastel pinks, glowing whites, gentle blues and golds, as though the ground itself had been painted with hope.

Petals drifted lazily through the air, catching the light as they fell.

He straightened, eyes scanning the horizon.

At the heart of the garden stood a grand stage, pristine and radiant, framed by arches of flowers and shimmering lights that felt permanently frozen in the moment before a live show. Spotlights hovered above it like expectant stars, waiting to be turned on.

This place wasn't loud like Street SEKAI.

Wasn't rigid like School SEKAI.

It breathed.

Emotion saturated the air—anticipation, longing, insecurity, pride. Dreams layered upon dreams, polished on the surface yet fragile underneath.

Yuu exhaled slowly.

"…Yeah," he muttered. "Definitely idols."

Just as he wandered deeper into the garden, the flowers began to thin—petals giving way to polished flooring, soft soil replaced by gleaming panels that reflected the sky above. The air shifted, too. Less breeze, more stillness. The faint hum of music sharpened into something closer to anticipation.

Ahead, the stage loomed in full.

Lights arced overhead like suspended constellations. Curtains of translucent fabric fluttered even without wind. It was a place built to be seen—to hold applause, to magnify smiles, to swallow doubt beneath spotlights.

Yuu stopped at the edge.

"…Miku."

The surface of his smartwatch flickered.

Static danced for half a second—pixels misaligning, color warping—before Hatsune Miku emerged as a small hologram above his wrist. Unlike the warm glow of the garden, she looked slightly distorted here, her outline shimmering as if struggling to fully settle into this SEKAI.

"♪ Calling me already?" she chimed, voice light—but the glitch beneath it was unmistakable.

"Synchronize this SEKAI," Yuu said. "With the other two."

Miku blinked. "With… Street SEKAI and School SEKAI?"

"Yes." His gaze never left the stage.

There was a pause.

Not a system delay.

A consideration.

Miku raised a hand, data streaming around her fingers.

“Okay,” she said, smile returning—brighter now, steadier. “Synchronization initiated♪”

Lines of light carved themselves into the space.

“…There,” Miku said, a little breathless. “Links established. They’ll be able to meet now—talk, move between boundaries."

Yuu stepped forward.

Light surged outward in a slow, deliberate pulse—like a breath the world had been holding finally released. The polished floor beneath him gleamed like glass, reflecting his silhouette with unsettling clarity, every edge too sharp, too perfect. Above, the suspended lights shifted, constellations rearranging themselves as if recalculating his position—tracking him.

The stage was awake.

“…Let’s go meet the Virtual Singers here,” Yuu said quietly.

His voice barely carried, yet it was enough.

Miku’s hologram rose from his smartwatch, drifting higher as though caught by an unseen current. The faint distortion around her form shimmered—pixels wavering, colors misaligned—before slowly stabilizing. She still wasn’t fully anchored here, but she was close. Close enough to be heard.

“Stage SEKAI’s Virtual Singers are a little different,” she said, tone gentler than before. “They shine brightest when someone’s watching… or when someone needs them.”

The air shifted.

At the far edges of the stage, light began to gather.

At first, they were no more than silhouettes—etched in pale radiance against the curtains, outlines sketched by anticipation itself. Then color bled in. Weight followed. Presence.

Rin appeared first, stretching her arms as if shaking off the last echoes of rehearsal, movements sharp and confident, energy crackling beneath her grin. Len emerged beside her, hands laced behind his head, eyes immediately locking onto Yuu with open curiosity. Luka stepped forward next, calm and composed, her very presence smoothing the atmosphere, as though she stabilized the space simply by existing within it.

A speaker faded into being—, and MEIKO leaned against it as if it had always been there, arms crossed, gaze keen and assessing. KAITO lingered just behind the others, adjusting his scarf, eyes gentle but alert, watching not just Yuu—but the way the stage itself responded to him.

All of them turned their attention his way.

Silence settled—not uncomfortable, but deliberate. Measured.

“Oh?” Rin tilted her head, ponytail swaying. “You’re not one of them.”

Len snorted. “Yeah. No glowsticks. No cheering. You look more like a stagehand than a fan.”

“That’s one way to put it,” Yuu replied, unfazed.

Luka smiled and took a step closer, her voice warm with intrigue. “That’s rare,” she said lightly. “A visitor?”

MEIKO raised an eyebrow. “So?” she added. “What brings you here?”

KAITO chuckled softly. “Already interrogating him?”

Yuu met their gazes—one by one.

“This SEKAI was unlocked through conflict,” he said. “Fear of the spotlight. Fear of losing it.”
A pause.
“I just… opened the door.”

Miku drifted down beside him, nodding. “And now, the people bound to this stage will start finding their way here.”

Rin’s grin widened. “Idols with too much heart and not enough peace?”

“Sounds about right,” Len agreed.

Yuu exhaled, slow and steady.

“Miku,” he said, tapping his smartwatch.

The device flickered.

Data fractured, then reassembled—light tearing through space as another hologram emerged, clearer, brighter, perfectly attuned to this place.

“—Oh wow!” the Stage SEKAI Miku gasped, eyes lighting up as she stared at her counterpart.
“Another me?!”

Two Mikus stood side by side—one slightly distorted, one radiant and whole—mirroring each other in the glow of the stage lights.

“Now then…” Yuu said, exhaling as if steadying himself. "I’ll explain what’s going on.”

One stood radiant beneath the stage lights, color and sound settling around her as naturally as breath—this SEKAI accepted her without question.
The other flickered faintly at the edges, her outline shimmering, hues slipping a fraction out of alignment—as if reality itself couldn’t quite decide where she belonged.

Yuu didn’t look away.

He spoke.

He told them about the beginning.

About waking up in a world that felt assembled rather than lived in—days slotting together too neatly, routines looping with mechanical precision. About the unease of realizing reality behaved less like life and more like a system running on borrowed logic.

About the SEKAI that should never have existed.

A place without color. Without sound. Without people.

An empty space where even loneliness echoed too loudly.

"…There was only one thing there," Yuu said quietly. "A broken Miku. Waiting."

His Miku lowered her gaze, fingers curling slightly as if she remembered the silence too.

"That was the Non-Existence SEKAI," she said.

Yuu nodded.

"And every time I interfere," he continued, voice steady but heavy, "something lags. Memories misalign. Events echo before they happen. People recognize me when they shouldn't."

The stage lights dimmed a fraction, as if listening.

KAITO's expression tightened. "Anomalies," he murmured.

MEIKO pushed herself upright from the speaker, her posture sharpening. "So… the people from other SEKAI," she said slowly, "they experienced these anomalies too?"

"Yes," Yuu replied. "So far."

He paused.

"There's already been one death, Mochizuki Honami."

Rin sucked in a quiet breath.

"But I looped back, saved

her. The same thing happened in Street SEKAI—Azusawa Kohane and Shinonome Akito nearly died. Aoyagi Toya nearly abandoned his dream."

Len frowned. "You're rewriting outcomes."

(Because, to begin with, it's my fault for interfering with the game's story.)

"I don't have a choice," Yuu said. "If I don't act, the system corrects itself in worse ways."

Silence pressed down on the stage.

Then—

"But this time," Yuu said, lifting his gaze, "it's different."

The Stage SEKAI Miku tilted her head. "Different… how?"

"In the original script," Yuu said, "Haruka Kiritani retires because of trauma and guilt. No spectacle. No incident. Just quiet withdrawal."

His eyes darkened.

“But instead, a stalker incident occurred.”

“That’s not supposed to happen.”

“No,” Yuu agreed. “It’s not part of the story.”

Luka clasped her hands together, expression troubled. “So the world is compensating.”

“Or panicking,” Rin muttered.

Yuu let out a slow breath. “Stage SEKAI isn’t reacting to failure,” he said. “It’s reacting to exposure. Too many eyes. Too much pressure. Too much fear of falling off the stage.”

The lights above trembled—just slightly.

The radiant Miku looked toward the empty seats beyond the stage, where an unseen audience should have been.

“…This SEKAI was born from wanting to shine,” she said softly. “But also from being afraid of the moment the lights turn off.”

Yuu nodded.

“And if this keeps diverging,” he said, “then what happened to Haruka won’t be the last deviation.”

KAITO exhaled. “Which means—”

“—MORE MORE JUMP,” MEIKO finished grimly, “is already standing on unstable ground.”

KAITO broke the silence first.

“Well… what do you want us to do?”

“Please guide them,” Yuu said. “And support them.”

He turned back to the Virtual Singers, meeting each of their gazes in turn.

“You’re what this SEKAI listens to. What it trusts. When they arrive here confused, shaken, doubting themselves—you’ll be the first voices they hear.”

The Stage SEKAI Miku straightened, her expression bright but resolute. “You want us to be their anchor.”

“Yes.”

MEIKO crossed her arms, thoughtful rather than skeptical now. “And you?”

“I’ll take care of the anomaly.”

The words were simple.

Too simple for what they meant.

Rin frowned. “You say that like it’s nothing.”

“It’s not,” Yuu admitted. “But it’s my responsibility. The deviations started when I interfered. If something’s going to break the script completely… it should be me standing in the way.”

Luka’s eyes softened. “You plan to stay in the shadows.”

“Someone has to,” Yuu replied. “This stage can’t afford another spotlight fracture.”

KAITO nodded slowly. “Then we’ll do our part.”

One by one, the others followed—MEIKO with a firm nod, Luka with a gentle smile, Rin and Len with renewed determination.

Miku floated closer to Yuu, her voice soft but unwavering. “We’ll protect their hearts.”

The stage lights brightened.

Not fully—just enough to promise something ahead.

Yuu took a step back, already preparing to leave, the glow of the stage no longer clinging to him.

“Thank you."

Chapter End Notes

In the current MMJ Arc story (in-game), KAITO and MEIKO are not present; I just included them for fun. LOL

Chapter 72: Coincidence

The shutter clicked.

Once.
Twice.
Again.

“Great! That’s perfect!” the photographer called out, lowering the camera with visible satisfaction. “I hope we get the chance to work together again soon!”

Shizuku inclined her head, posture graceful even as the lights dimmed.

“Thank you for today,” she replied, voice smooth, practiced. “I look forward to the next shoot.”

Compliments followed her like a familiar echo—polite, distant, weightless.

Her manager was already at her side, tablet in hand. “Your dance lessons for the new song are starting soon. We should get going.”

“Right,” Shizuku said.

She smiled as she always did.

The Cheerful * Days Theater buzzed with movement—footsteps, chatter, the faint hum of speakers cooling down after rehearsal. Sweat clung lightly to her skin as the final count ended.

“All right! That’s enough for today!” the trainer announced.

“Thank you!” the members replied in unison.

Shizuku bowed along with them, hands folded neatly in front of her.

Next was the radio recording.

Then fittings.

Then—

She paused.

“…My towel.”

Her gaze drifted toward the locker room. Did I leave it there?

As she walked down the corridor, her steps slowed.

Hm?
Voices.

Muffled, but unmistakable.

She stopped just outside the door.

“Shizuku got another solo photoshoot,” someone said. “A magazine cover this time.”

A short, humorless laugh followed.

“Clearly favoritism. They don’t even try to hide it.”

Another voice chimed in, sharper. “Yeah. Guess a pretty face is all they care about. It’s not like she’s actually better at singing or dancing than the rest of us.”

The words landed cleanly.

Too cleanly.

Shizuku’s fingers curled slightly at her side.

(…Not this again.)

The thought surfaced without bitterness—only tired familiarity. Like stepping onto a stage she’d performed on too many times before.

She inhaled.

Then opened the door.

“Sorry to interrupt,” she said brightly, smile already in place. “Have you seen my towel anywhere?”

The room froze.

“Oh—!” one of them startled, nearly dropping what she was holding.

Shizuku’s eyes flicked toward the bench.

“There it is,” she said, stepping forward to retrieve it. She wrapped the towel around her neck, still smiling, still gentle. “Thank you.”

She turned toward them once more, expression warm, unshaken.

“Well then,” she added, “see you later. I hope our next show goes well.”

The door closed softly behind her.

The hallway felt quieter than before.

Shizuku kept walking.

Her smile didn’t fade—not immediately.

But as the echoes of her footsteps stretched on, something inside her felt thinner.

Like applause heard from behind a wall.

Like standing center stage and wondering—

Am I really shining…

—or am I just standing where the light happens to fall?

The glass doors slid shut behind her with a soft click.

For a moment, Shizuku stood there—outside the agency building, city noise washing over her like a distant tide. The afternoon sun reflected off windows and passing cars, bright enough to sting her eyes.

She lifted both hands—

Clap.

Her palms met her cheeks, sharp but gentle, a small jolt of sensation grounding her.

“No,” she said firmly, forcing a lightness into her voice. “Don’t get negative now, Shizuku.”

The words weren’t for anyone else.

They were a reminder.

She exhaled, shoulders relaxing, and turned away from the building. Her steps lightened as she headed toward a familiar street—one she’d walked many times before, always when she needed to breathe.

A few minutes later, the café welcomed her with warmth.

Soft music hummed through the air. The scent of coffee and sugar wrapped around her like a blanket. She slipped into her usual seat by the window, ordered without hesitation, and waited.

When the plate arrived, she picked up her fork, eyes lighting up just a little.

She took a bite.

“Mmm…!” Her shoulders relaxed instantly. “This is perfect!”

The sweetness bloomed across her tongue—balanced, comforting, reliable. The same as she remembered.

“As expected of this café’s cake,” she murmured, smiling to herself.

For a brief moment, the whispers faded.

“Here’s your strawberry cake.”

The voice was gentle, unhurried.

Shizuku looked up as the plate was set down in front of her—a neat slice crowned with a glossy strawberry, cream piped just so, the faint steam of fresh pastry still lingering in the air.

“Thank you!” she said brightly.

She adjusted the plate, eyes sparkling with genuine delight as she picked up her fork. The first slice disappeared quickly—too quickly, really—and she didn't even try to hide the small, satisfied hum that escaped her.

Then she turned her attention to the strawberry cake.

She paused for just a second, admiring it like a tiny treasure.

"Alright," she murmured to herself, smiling. "Next is this one."

The fork sank in easily. Soft sponge. Fresh cream. The strawberry's sweetness cut through everything in a way that felt exactly right.

"Mmm…!"

Her expression softened, shoulders easing as if something tight inside her finally loosened.

It was a simple pleasure.

The café door chimed softly as Shizuku stepped back onto the sidewalk.

Warm afternoon air greeted her at once, sunlight slipping between tall buildings and settling gently over her shoulders like a familiar hand. She paused there for a moment, hands clasped behind her back, eyes half-lidded as she savored the lingering sweetness of strawberries and cream on her tongue.

"Now then…" she murmured, tilting her head. "What should I do today?"

Her schedule said she was busy—radio recording, choreography reviews, meetings stacked neatly one after another—but this moment was hers. A rare pocket of freedom, delicate enough that she could almost feel it slipping away if she acknowledged it too loudly.

She started walking.

Her heels tapped lightly against the pavement, rhythmic and unhurried. Reflections danced across shop windows as she passed—rows of clothes, pastries behind glass, her own figure briefly overlapping with the city's motion. Couples laughed as they went by. Students rushed past with bags slung over their shoulders. Somewhere down the street, music spilled faintly from an open storefront, thin but cheerful.

(I should relax while I can.)

The thought made her smile—soft, a little sheepish, as if she were indulging in something mildly rebellious.

"Maybe I'll take the long way," she decided quietly.

As she walked, she reached into her bag out of habit, fingers brushing against fabric, checking—

She froze.

Her steps slowed. Then stopped.

Her hand moved again, more deliberately this time. A small rustle. Nothing solid.

"…Huh?"

Her smile faltered.

She opened the bag wider, peering inside. Phone. Tissues. Lip balm. Keys.

Her breath caught.

"M-My wallet…?" she whispered.

A flicker of panic flashed across her face, quickly masked—but her shoulders stiffened, and her grip tightened around the strap of her bag.

(No, no… I definitely had it earlier.)

Her mind raced backward: the café counter, the tray, paying without thinking, the warmth of the plate in her hands—

Her eyes widened slightly.

"…Did I leave it there?"

Just as she lifted her phone, her fingers hesitated.

The screen lit up in her palm—bright, expectant, and suddenly far too aware of her. Shizuku stared at it, thumb hovering above the glass as if the device were waiting to judge her next move.

"…Ah."

Calling the café would be the sensible thing to do. Of course it would. One tap, maybe two. A polite explanation. An apology—possibly more than one.

She frowned slightly, lips pursing in thought.

(Was it the green button… or the one shaped like a phone?)

She tapped the screen, careful and tentative.

Nothing happened.

"…Eh?"

Her brows drew together as the display shifted, icons rearranging themselves with quiet efficiency—almost smug in their refusal to cooperate. She blinked, then tilted the phone, angling it as though that alone might persuade it to behave.

"No, that's not it…" she murmured, voice barely audible over the hum of traffic.

Laughter passed by her left. Someone brushed her shoulder as they hurried past. Shizuku flinched slightly and stepped aside, suddenly aware that she had come to a complete stop in the middle of the sidewalk, staring down at her phone with an intensity usually reserved for difficult choreography.

She tried again.

The camera opened.

"…Oh! I—I didn't mean—!"

She lowered the phone at once, cheeks warming as she hastily locked the screen. For a moment, she held it there, fingers loosening, then tightening again around its edges.

(Why is it always like this…)

A small sigh escaped her.

She looked back the way she'd come, the café's sign just barely visible down the street, half-hidden by passing pedestrians.

"…Maybe," she said softly, nodding to herself as if agreeing with an internal advisor, "it would be faster if I just went back."

Decision made, she slipped the phone into her bag with careful precision—gentle, deliberate, as though it might misbehave again if handled roughly—and turned around. Her spine straightened, determination returning to her gaze.

"Right," she said quietly. "Let's do that."

—

"It should be here… and here…"

Shizuku slowed, eyes scanning her surroundings as she retraced her steps. The streets looked familiar—too familiar. The same storefront. The same vending machine. The same narrow side road branching off at an angle that felt increasingly wrong.

Her steps faltered.

"…Huh?"

She stopped.

(Did I just… go in a circle?)

A ripple of confusion passed through her, followed by the faintest spark of unease. She pressed a finger lightly to her chin, brows furrowing as she tried to reconstruct the route in her head.

(Let's see… I left the agency building… turned left… walked straight… then right… and then right again…)

She looked around.

It still didn't line up.

Her shoulders slumped ever so slightly as she let out a longer sigh.

"I really wish Airi were here," she muttered.

Somewhere deep down, she knew Airi would already be complaining—hands on hips, voice sharp—but she'd also be pointing decisively down the correct street.

Shizuku smiled faintly at the thought.

"I finally found you!"

The voice cut through her thoughts, bright and slightly breathless.

Shizuku blinked and looked up.

"Huh?"

A boy stood a short distance away, having slowed to a stop as if he'd been half-running.

He looked relieved more than anything, his shoulders easing as soon as he met her gaze.

"The café staff said you left your wallet on the table," he explained, lifting one hand slightly as if to show proof. "Good thing I knew whose it was. Well, of course, I gave them my ID just in case they thought I was going to run off with it. Which… I guess it's understandable."

He laughed awkwardly at the end, rubbing the back of his neck.

Shizuku stared at him for a second, processing the words.

"…Really?"

"Yeah." He stepped closer and held out his hand.

Resting in his palm was her wallet—familiar, neatly worn, unmistakably hers.

"Here. Make sure you don't lose it."

Her breath caught.

She took it with both hands, fingers curling around it as if to confirm it was real. Warmth spread through her chest, followed quickly by relief—and then embarrassment, creeping up to her cheeks.

"Th—thank you!" she said, bowing her head instinctively. "I didn't even realize I'd dropped it…"

She straightened, then hesitated, curiosity softening her expression.

"Um… what's your name?"

The boy paused for just a fraction of a second.

"…Hazuki Yuu."

Shizuku smiled, gentle and sincere, the tension finally leaving her shoulders.

"Hazuki-kun, then?"

"Yeah."

“So, uhm…” Shizuku said softly, fingers tightening around the strap of her bag. She dipped her head in a polite, practiced bow, the movement gentle and careful. “I’ll… be going now.”

The words came out a little too quickly—like she was afraid of taking up any more of his time.

She straightened, offering him a warm, slightly bashful smile. Sunlight caught in her pale hair as she took a small step back, heels brushing against the pavement.

“Thank you again,” she added, sincerity clear in her voice. “I really appreciate it.”

“Hehe…”

The sound slipped out before she could stop it—soft, airy, almost embarrassed.

Shizuku lifted a hand to her cheek as she walked, fingertips brushing skin that still felt a little warm. The weight of her wallet in her bag was reassuring now, solid proof that she hadn’t imagined the whole thing.

“To think someone would save me in a pinch…” she murmured.

That was… really kind.)

She pictured his face again, the way he’d spoken so plainly, without hesitation or expectation. No awe. No distance. Just… normal.

Shizuku clasped her hands behind her back, posture relaxing for once.

“…I should be more careful next time."

– The next day –

The rooftop was wrapped in a gentle stillness, the late-morning breeze carrying the distant hum of the city below. Sunlight glinted off the safety rails, painting soft highlights across the concrete as clouds drifted lazily overhead.

Haruka stood near the fence, quiet as ever, gaze unfocused—somewhere between the sky and her own thoughts.

“…It’s wonderful to meet you all!” Minori said brightly, bowing a little too deeply as her voice rang with practiced cheer.

Airi let out a short laugh, hands on her hips. “That was good! I think you’ve finally got your introduction down.”

“R-Really?” Minori straightened, eyes lighting up. “Thank you so much!”

Shizuku stepped closer, her tone gentle but attentive. “You’ve done headshots already, right? How did they turn out?”

“Oh—yes! Um, here,” Minori said, fumbling with her phone before holding it out. “I can show you!”

Airi leaned in, scrutinizing the screen. “Natural look, huh? I like it. These should be fine.” She glanced sideways at Minori, expression sharpening just a bit. “But don’t forget to work on the real thing, too. You don’t want the interviewers thinking you’re a completely different person in real life.”

“T-That’s true…” Minori laughed nervously, shoulders hunching in on themselves. Her gaze dropped. “Everyone else is always so pretty—both in photos and in person. Now I’m starting to get nervous.” She hesitated, then smiled shyly at Shizuku. “I wish I could be as pretty as you, Hinomori. Then I wouldn’t have to worry so much.”

Shizuku blinked, surprised.

Then she smiled—not the flawless, distant smile meant for cameras, but something softer. Real.

“You don’t become an idol just because of looks,” she said calmly. “You need heart, too. The desire to work hard for your fans—that’s the most important thing an idol can have.”

Airi opened her mouth. “Shizuku, that’s—”

“At least,” Shizuku continued, eyes drifting briefly toward the open sky, “that’s what someone taught me a long time ago.” She chuckled lightly, almost embarrassed. “Sorry. I didn’t mean to get so serious.”

She turned back to Minori, her gaze warm and steady.

“I think you’re wonderful just the way you are,” she said. “All you need to do… is believe in yourself.”

Minori’s eyes shimmered. “Right! Thank you!”

The moment eased, conversation flowing naturally again. But Airi tilted her head, studying Shizuku more closely than before.

“…You know,” she said slowly, “now that I think about it, you seem in a pretty good mood today.”

Shizuku paused.

“Hm?” She pressed a finger lightly to her chin, then smiled, almost to herself. “I guess so…”

Her gaze drifted away, past the rooftop, past the school buildings—somewhere quieter.

“…It might be because of something that happened yesterday.”

“Yesterday?” Minori and Airi echoed in unison.

Shizuku blinked, visibly startled, as if she hadn’t meant for the words to escape at all.

“Ah—” A soft, airy laugh slipped from her lips as she lifted a hand to her cheek, fingertips brushing warm skin. “I didn’t mean it like that.”

Too late.

Minori leaned forward immediately, eyes sparkling as she'd just been handed the opening to her favorite drama. "Yesterday?!" she repeated. "What happened yesterday?!"

Airi crossed her arms, weight shifting to one hip, a knowing arch to her brow. "Yeah, you don't just drop a line like that and expect us to move on."

For the first time since they'd arrived on the rooftop, Haruka turned from the sky. Her gaze settled on Shizuku—quiet, steady, watching.

"…It wasn't anything dramatic," she said at last, tone gentle. "I just… misplaced my wallet."

Minori gasped sharply. "EHH?! That's totally dramatic!"

"I was fine!" Shizuku hurried to add, hands lifting in a small, placating wave. "Really. Someone returned it to me before anything bad happened."

Airi's eyes narrowed, sharp and perceptive. "Someone."

"Yes."

Minori clasped her hands together, practically glowing. "That's so sweet! Like something straight out of a drama!"

Airi scoffed, though curiosity lay beneath it. "And? What else? Did he say anything weird?"

"No," Shizuku said, shaking her head softly. "He was… very straightforward. Polite." She paused, searching for the right word. "A little awkward, maybe."

Haruka's fingers tightened against the rooftop railing—just slightly. Barely noticeable.

"…Did he tell you his name?" she asked.

Shizuku paused.

"…Hazuki Yuu."

The wind passed between them, carrying the name with it.

Minori blinked. "Hazuki… Yuu?"

Airi frowned, something clicking into place. "Wait."

She looked up sharply.

"…That Hazuki?"

The four of them fell into a quiet that felt heavier than the breeze brushing across the rooftop.

"…Seriously…?" Airi muttered at last, breaking the silence with a low scoff.

Minori's gaze bounced between them, her earlier excitement slowing, uncertainty creeping in. "W-Wait—why is everyone reacting like that? Is this… a thing?"

Haruka's voice was soft, but firm when she spoke.

“It’s no longer… coincidence.”

Shizuku tilted her head slightly, concern surfacing in her eyes. “Haruka?”

Airi clicked her tongue and looked away, arms tightening across her chest. “You’ve gotta be kidding me. That guy just keeps popping up everywhere, huh?”

Minori’s eyes widened. “Ehh?! You know him too?!”

“He helped me get away from a mob,” Airi said bluntly. “Dragged me into an alley. Terrible method. Effective result.”

Shizuku’s gentle smile faded, replaced by something more contemplative. Her fingers laced together in front of her, knuckles resting lightly against her skirt. “So it really wasn’t just chance…”

“That’s… kind of scary,” Minori whispered.

Airi exhaled through her nose. “Or kind of suspicious.”

Shizuku turned her gaze outward, toward the school grounds below. Sunlight caught in her pale eyes, reflecting off the white rooftops and distant streets beyond. Her voice, when it came, was hesitant—almost too honest.

“…Could it be… a stalker?”

Minori and Airi both snapped their heads toward her.

At the same time, Haruka froze.

Her body stiffened as if the word itself had struck her. Color drained from her face, lips parting slightly without sound. Her fingers curled against the railing, trembling—just enough to notice if you were looking.

And they were.

Minori’s breath caught. “H-Haruka…?”

Airi’s expression sharpened immediately. “…Hey. What’s wrong?”

Haruka didn’t answer.

“I–I’m fine… It’s just—”

Haruka’s words caught halfway out.

Her breathing faltered, shallow and uneven, like she’d forgotten the rhythm she’d followed a thousand times before. One breath came too fast. The next didn’t come at all.

“Haruka,” Shizuku said gently, already stepping closer. Her voice was calm, practiced in softness. “You don’t have to force yourself.”

Minori panicked instantly. “Ah—wait—your breathing—! O-Okay, okay, let’s slow down, yeah? In… and out…!”

Airi was already there, grip firm but careful around Haruka’s wrist. “Hey. Look at me,” she said, sharper than before—but not unkind. “You’re here. On the rooftop. It’s us.”

Haruka swallowed, shoulders trembling.

The sky felt too bright.

The wind too loud.

For a split second, the rooftop blurred—overlaid with flashes she didn’t want: crowds pressing in, voices calling her name without caring if she answered, footsteps that never seemed far enough away.

“I just—” she tried again, voice thin. “When I hear that word… my body reacts before I can stop it.”

Shizuku’s hand found Haruka’s back, warm and steady. “You don’t need to explain,” she said. “Not right now.”

Minori nodded furiously. “Y-Yeah! We’re here! You’re not alone, okay?!”

Haruka squeezed her eyes shut, then forced them open again—focusing on Airi’s familiar scowl, on Minori’s worried eyes, on Shizuku’s gentle smile that never quite stopped being kind.

Slowly—carefully—she drew in a breath.

Then another.

“…I’m sorry,” she whispered at last.

Airi scoffed, but her grip didn’t loosen. “Don’t be stupid. None of this is your fault.”

Shizuku straightened, her voice gentle—but firm enough that it left no room for argument.

“Okay,” she said softly. “Let’s end it here for now. Minori, please take Haruka back to her home.”

“Eh?! M–Me?!” Minori squeaked, eyes widening as she instinctively pointed at herself.

Shizuku smiled, “Yes. You’re the closest to Haruka, after all.”

Minori glanced at Haruka—still pale, still breathing carefully, and something in her expression shifted.

“…Okay,” she said, nodding hard. “Yeah. I can do that.”

Airi crossed her arms, watching closely. “Text us when you get there. And don’t take shortcuts.”

“I won’t!” Minori replied immediately, then gently took Haruka’s hand. “Come on, Haruka. Let’s go slow, okay?”

Haruka hesitated, then nodded. Her grip on Minori's hand tightened just a little—as if anchoring herself.

"…Thank you," she murmured.

Minori beamed, a little teary but determined. "Anytime!"

The two of them headed for the stairwell, footsteps fading one after the other. Minori kept talking the whole way—about cake she wanted to try, about a dog she'd seen that morning—filling the air with normalcy, with warmth.

The rooftop grew quieter.

Airi let out a breath she'd clearly been holding. "Tch… that was close."

Shizuku remained by the railing, fingers resting lightly against the cool metal. Her gaze lingered on the door long after it closed.

"…Airi," she said at last.

"Yeah?"

"About Hazuki Yuu," Shizuku continued, voice thoughtful rather than afraid. "I don't think he's a stalker."

Airi shot her a look. "That's a strong claim for someone who just found out he keeps 'coincidentally' showing up."

"I know," Shizuku replied. "But when I think about him… I don't feel watched."

She searched for the right words.

"I feel… helped. Like he appears when something is about to go wrong—and leaves before it becomes something else."

Airi clicked her tongue. "You're way too nice, you know that?"

Shizuku laughed softly. "Maybe."

– Switching to Minori and Haruka's POV –

The stairwell echoed softly as they descended, the rooftop door closing behind them with a muted click.

Minori didn't let go.

She kept her grip warm and steady, matching Haruka's pace without saying a word at first. One step. Then another. The city noise slowly crept back in—distant traffic, the hum of afternoon life continuing as if nothing had happened.

Haruka's breathing was still shallow.

Minori noticed immediately.

“Hey,” she said gently, forcing a lightness into her voice as she squeezed Haruka’s hand. “We’re not in a rush, okay? We can go super slow. Like… snail-speed slow.”

Haruka let out a faint, shaky breath.

“…Sorry,” she murmured. “I didn’t mean to worry everyone.”

“You didn’t,” Minori said quickly. “And even if you did, that’s what friends are for! Worrying is basically part of the job.”

They reached the bottom of the stairs and stepped out onto the street. Sunlight spilled across the pavement, warm and ordinary. Too ordinary, almost—like the world hadn’t noticed the way Haruka’s chest still felt tight.

They walked.

For a while, neither of them spoke.

Then Minori hummed—quietly at first. just enough to fill the silence.

“…Minori,” she said softly.

“Yeah?”

"Why do you want to become an idol?"

Minori blinked, a little surprised by the question.

They were halfway down the familiar street now—the one lined with vending machines and convenience stores, the afternoon sun catching in the windows just right. She slowed her steps without thinking, making sure she stayed in sync with Haruka.

“…That’s a big question,” Minori said with a small laugh. “Out of nowhere, too.”

Haruka didn’t look at her. Her gaze stayed forward, unfocused, like she was watching something far past the road ahead.

“Sorry,” she said. “You don’t have to answer if—”

“No! No, I want to,” Minori interrupted quickly, shaking her head. “I just… need a second.”

She thought back.

Back to a TV screen glowing late at night.
Back to a stage that felt impossibly far away.
Back to a girl who smiled so brightly it made the world feel lighter—even through glass.

“…Because,” Minori began, voice softer now, “there was someone who saved me once.”

Haruka’s fingers twitched in Minori’s grasp.

“I was having a really bad time,” Minori continued. “I kept failing. Over and over again. And every time, I thought, ‘Maybe this just isn’t for me.’”

She laughed quietly, a little embarrassed. “Actually, I thought that a lot.”

They stopped at a crosswalk. The signal was red. Cars passed, wind brushing past their uniforms.

“But then I’d see you,” Minori said.

Haruka finally looked at her.

Not fully—just enough.

“I’d see you on stage, smiling like everything was okay. Like you believed in the crowd. And somehow… that made me believe in myself too.”

Minori squeezed her hand, warmth pressing through the lingering chill.

“So I thought—if I could do that for someone else, even just one person… then maybe all the falling would be worth it.”

The signal changed.

They crossed together.

Haruka’s breathing had steadied now. Not perfect—but better. Manageable.

“…Minori,” she said after a moment.

“Mm?”

“You don’t have to become like me.”

Minori blinked—then smiled, wide and earnest.

“I know!” she said brightly. “I don’t want to.”

Haruka paused again, surprised.

“I want to become an idol like me,” Minori went on. “Clumsy, loud, probably embarrassing—but someone who doesn’t give up.”

She tilted her head, grin softening. “You were my starting line, Haruka. Not my goal.”

For a second, Haruka couldn’t speak.

The city noise faded into something distant and dull, replaced by a tight feeling in her chest—not fear this time, but something warmer. Heavier.

“…Thank you,” she said quietly.

Minori beamed. “Anytime!”

– The Next Day –

The rooftop was bathed in late-afternoon light, the sun hanging low enough to soften the concrete beneath their feet. A faint breeze drifted past the fence, carrying with it the distant sounds of the

city—cars, voices, a world that kept moving no matter how tired you were.

Minori dropped down onto the ground with a dramatic sigh.

“Phew… I’m exhausted…”

Shizuku smiled warmly, hands clasped in front of her. “Good work, Minori. You were really working hard today.”

Airi rested her hands on her hips, already in instructor mode. “Make sure you spend some extra time on the steps you kept missing today. Got it?”

“Yes, ma’am!” Minori shot back instinctively—then flinched. “Ouch…”

Airi’s sharp expression softened instantly. “Hey—are you all right?”

Minori waved a hand, trying to laugh it off. “I think I twisted my ankle a bit on that last part. It’s not bad, though! I’m sure it’ll be fine in no time.”

“Minori,” Haruka said gently. She had already stepped closer. “Let me see.”

“Huh? Haruka?”

Haruka crouched down, careful and practiced, her fingers hovering just before making contact. She examined Minori’s ankle with a calm focus that felt reassuring all on its own.

“…Good. It doesn’t look swollen,” Haruka said. “You might want to put a cold compress on it, just to be safe. Working hard is good—but don’t overdo it, okay?”

“R-Right!” Minori nodded quickly. “Thanks, Haruka.”

As Haruka stood back up, Minori watched her—sunlight catching in her hair, her expression kind but serious.

(She’s amazing…) Minori thought, heart fluttering.
(Pretty, kind… and always looking out for others. The more I get to know her, the more I want to be an idol like her!)

“Wah—! Wh-What the—?!”

Light suddenly burst into existence beside them.

A translucent figure shimmered into view, pixels knitting together until a familiar teal silhouette hovered cheerfully in midair.

“Hi, Minori!”

“M-Miku?!” Minori yelped. “Again?!”

Miku clasped her hands together apologetically, smiling bright as ever. “Sorry for startling you! I was planning on waiting for you in that world, but I started getting worried you might be feeling a little down.”

“…Really?” Minori blinked. “I feel pretty good, actually.”

Haruka said nothing.

Her eyes lingered on Miku.

“I’d love for all of you to come watch our show!” Miku continued, spinning once in midair. “I’m sure you’ll feel even better afterward♪.”

“Your… show?”

“Just take a look at your playlist!” Miku said brightly. “SEKAI will be waiting for you!”

With a final wave, her form scattered into light—gone as suddenly as she’d appeared.

“…She disappeared again,” Minori murmured.

Airi folded her arms, unimpressed. “That’s gotta be some new kind of advertisement. Way too realistic.”

Shizuku frowned slightly, thoughtful. “She mentioned SEKAI… I’m sure she said that last time, too.”

Minori looked down at her phone. “She said to check my playlist…”

Her screen refreshed on its own.

“Huh?” Minori tilted her head. “There’s a song here called Untitled.”

“Untitled?” Airi repeated. “As in, it doesn’t even have a name?”

“You think she wants us to listen to it?” Minori asked.

The moment her finger brushed the screen—

FLASH.

White light swallowed her phone, spilling upward like it had been waiting for permission.

“?!”

“Wahh—! My phone is lighting up!”

Chapter 73: Something You Want To Do

The rooftop of Kamiyama High lay quiet in the late afternoon, washed in pale gold and long shadows. Wind rattled softly against the chain-link fence, tugging at loose fabric and carrying the distant sounds of the city far below.

Yuu stood still, fingers curled around the cold metal, staring at nothing in particular.

His smartwatch flickered.

Light pooled above his wrist, resolving into the familiar, softly glowing form of Miku. Her expression was gentler than usual, voice lowered as if the space itself demanded it.

“Yuu.”

“I’m guessing they entered Stage SEKAI already,” he said, tone calm—too calm. It wasn’t a question.

Miku nodded.

“…Will they be alright?” she asked.

“Yeah.”

“They will be. You and Rin will put on a show they won’t forget.”

Miku tilted her head. “And after that?”

“The moment it ends, Haruka will insist on leaving the SEKAI.”

“Huh?” Miku blinked. “Why?”

A faint, humorless smile crossed his face.
“She’ll probably say something like, ‘I need to get ready for class.’”

He straightened, letting go of the fence.

“But it won’t just be her, Momoi and Hinomori will follow too.”

Miku’s glow dimmed a fraction. “Is that… from the script?”

“Yeah.” He nodded once. “From the game’s original flow.”

Miku hesitated. “Then—”

“Don’t worry,” Yuu cut in gently. “I already told the Stage SEKAI Virtual Singers what to do. Their role is set.”

He rolled his shoulders, then stretched his arms and legs like someone preparing for a long walk.

“What comes next,” he said quietly, “is on me.”

He turned toward the rooftop door.

“Yuu.”

He stopped.

“Yes, Miku?”

Her voice softened further, almost fragile.

“…Can’t you just be honest with them? Tell them you need their help?”

The wind slipped between them.

For a moment, Yuu said nothing.

Then his gaze dropped to the concrete at his feet, shadows crossing his eyes.

“I can’t. It’s too late for that.”

He reached out, twisted the doorknob, and pulled the door open.

Light spilled from the stairwell, swallowing his silhouette as he stepped inside.

The door closed behind him with a dull click.

The courtyard of Miyamasuzaka Girls Academy was bathed in soft morning light, the air still cool enough to carry the scent of dew from the hedges lining the paths. Students passed by in scattered clusters, their chatter a distant, indistinct hum.

Airi stood near the edge of the courtyard, arms folded, gaze fixed somewhere far beyond the school walls.

“…That show yesterday,” she muttered. “It was the bomb.”

Shizuku turned at the sound of her voice, surprise flickering briefly across her face before settling into a gentle smile.
“Oh, Airi. Good morning.”

She folded her hands neatly in front of her. “Yesterday really was strange, wasn’t it?”

Airi snorted quietly. “Strange doesn’t even begin to cover it. Hatsune Miku, another world, getting pulled somewhere just by playing a song…” She shook her head. “How does that even work?”

Shizuku watched her for a moment longer than necessary.
“…Still,” she said softly, “you looked like you were enjoying yourself.”

Airi stiffened. “Huh?”

“I could tell,” Shizuku continued, voice calm but certain. “Your face during the show. You weren’t just watching—you were there.”

“No, I—” Airi started, then cut herself off.

Shizuku took a small step closer. “Airi… are you sure you don’t still want to—”

Airi’s jaw tightened.

“…Just because you want something to happen doesn’t mean it will,” she snapped. “You know why I quit being an idol.”

The words opened a door she’d tried to keep shut.

—

Bright studio lights.

A manager’s excited voice.

Airi! You got an offer for a variety show—prime time!

Her heart is racing. Her laughter. The thrill of being seen.

Finally… my big chance.

Days filled with practice, not just singing and dancing, but talking.

Jokes.

Timing.

Learning how to shine under a different kind of spotlight.

Then—

Another variety show. Same day as the mini concert.

Her hesitation.

Her guilt.

Her agreement.

If this helps the group… then it’s worth it.

And later—

You don’t really stand out as an idol. We’re going to push you as variety talent instead.

The words still rang sharp and cruel, no matter how many times she replayed them.

—

“I fought back,” Airi said, voice low as the memory faded. “But they’d already decided. They said it was the only way I’d survive.”

Her fingers curled into fists.

“I changed agencies. They promised things would be different.” A humorless laugh escaped her. “They weren’t.”

She looked away.

“In the end, nobody saw me as an idol anymore. Not the industry. Not even the fans who used to come see me.”

“That’s not true,” Shizuku said immediately, stepping forward. “You’re an amazing idol, Airi. You give people hope, and you’re—”

“Just stop.” Airi’s voice cracked, sharp enough to cut. “I get it. I’m not blind.”

Shizuku faltered. “But—”

“Please,” Airi snapped. “Just stop!”

Shizuku froze.

Airi turned on her then, words spilling out before she could rein them back in.

“What do you know, Shizuku? You’ve got looks and talent. People praise you no matter what you do! How could you ever understand someone who doesn’t have that—someone who works and works and still can’t get acknowledged?!”

Her breath hitched.

“…Everyone says you’re a perfect idol,” she finished bitterly. “And you barely have to try.”

Silence fell between them, heavy and unmistakably broken.

Airi’s shoulders sagged.

“…Ah. Crap.”

Shizuku flinched at the sound of her name.

She didn’t turn around.

The courtyard suddenly felt too open, too exposed—the sunlight pressing down on her shoulders as if it could see straight through her. Her breath trembled, uneven, and before she could stop it, a soft sound slipped past her lips.

“…sniff…”

Airi’s chest tightened.

“Shizuku—wait!” She stepped forward, shoes scraping against the stone far louder than they should have been.

Shizuku turned sharply, skirts fluttering, and broke into a run.

— Shizuku’s POV —

Her breaths came out ragged, breaking apart the quiet street as she finally slowed to a stop.

Too far.

She realized it only after the buildings around her changed—unfamiliar storefronts, quieter sidewalks, the faint hum of traffic no longer carrying the voices of her school. Her legs trembled, the adrenaline draining all at once, and she bent forward slightly, hands braced against her knees.

“Sniff… not Airi, too…”

The words slipped out before she could stop them.

Her vision blurred, the present dissolving into something older, warmer—and painfully clearer.

—

“I found you!”

Shizuku remembered flinching, startled by the sudden voice and the girl who had appeared in front of her with hands on her hips and fire in her eyes.

“You’re Shizuku Hinomori, right? The one who won the Grand Prix? I’m Airi Momoi! I’ll be your rival from now on, so don’t forget it! And—hey, why do you look like you’re about to cry?!”

She could still feel it—that crushing weight in her chest, the way the world had tilted overnight.

“…Everything’s just so overwhelming,” she’d admitted back then. “My friends sent in an application without telling me, and suddenly I was at an audition. Then I won. Everyone expects so much from me, but everyone else has more experience. I don’t want to hold anyone back…”

Airi had stared at her, baffled—then sighed.

“Huh… I thought you’d have more attitude. Pull yourself together! You’re an idol now. You can’t afford to be timid.”

“But—”

“An idol is someone who gives hope to their fans.”

“Hope…?”

“Yeah. By giving everything we’ve got, we pass on the feeling of working hard for tomorrow. That’s what matters. Not looks. Not talent. Heart.”

She remembered the towel pressed into her hands, rough and warm.

“Dry those tears. A pretty face like yours should be smiling. We’re in this together now—don’t think I’ll let you beat me, though!”

“…Right. Thank you, Airi.”

—

The memory shattered as Shizuku squeezed her eyes shut.

(It’s because of her… because of what she said back then… that I made it this far.)

Her fingers curled into the fabric of her skirt.

(But everything’s different now. Even Airi…)

Her shoulders sagged.

(I can’t do this anymore.)

“…Um.”

The voice came from behind her.

Shizuku stiffened.

She knew that voice.

“Huh?” it continued, mildly incredulous. “Don’t tell me you got lost again?”

Slowly, she turned around.

There he was—standing a short distance away, hands tucked casually into his pockets, expression caught somewhere between concern and familiarity.

“…It’s you,” she said softly.

He tilted his head, eyes flicking briefly over her tear-streaked face.

“…Why are you crying?”

“You’re… Yuu Hazuki-kun, right?”

The name left her lips softly, as if testing whether it would drift away.

He blinked then gave a small, crooked smile.

“…You remembered my name.” His voice carried a hint of surprise, quickly smoothed into something lighter. “I’m honored, Miss Hinomori.”

Before she could react, he reached up, lifted the cap from his own head, and gently settled it over hers.

It was warm.

Not heavy, just enough weight to make her aware of it, the brim dipping slightly over her eyes, blocking out the harsh edge of the afternoon sun.

Shizuku froze, hands hovering uselessly near the brim.

“H-huh…?”

Yuu stepped back half a pace, giving her space, his hands slipping back into his pockets like he hadn’t just done something wildly intimate by accident.

“Would you like to tell me what happened?” he asked, tone casual—but not careless. “Well… only if you don’t mind.”

His gaze shifted briefly to the street, then back to her.

“It’s not like I have a lot of free time on my hands anyway.”

The words were light. Almost joking.

But his eyes didn’t rush her.

Shizuku’s fingers slowly came up, touching the edge of the cap. She swallowed, her chest still tight, emotions tangled and raw.

For a moment, she simply stood there—beneath borrowed shade, beneath borrowed patience.

Then, quietly—

“…I might cry more,” she warned, voice trembling.

Yuu nodded once, unfazed.

“That’s fine, I’m not going anywhere.”

“Alright then.”

Yuu’s gaze drifted past her shoulder.

Shizuku noticed it a moment later—the subtle weight of attention lingering at the edge of the street. A pair of pedestrians slowing. A whispered double-take. Curious glances catching on her face, on the cap that very much did not belong to her.

Yuu cleared his throat softly, the sound deliberately ordinary.

“…How about we go to a park?”

He said it like a suggestion.

Shizuku blinked, then followed his line of sight. Realization dawned—slow, embarrassed, familiar.

Her shoulders drew in just a little.

“…Ah.”

The cap suddenly made sense.

She adjusted it instinctively, tugging the brim lower, shadows slipping over her eyes like a curtain being drawn. The world felt quieter beneath it. Safer.

“A park sounds nice,” she said after a beat, voice gentler now. “Somewhere… less busy.”

Yuu nodded, already turning, careful to keep his pace unhurried so she wouldn’t feel chased or led.

“This way,” he said. “There’s one a few blocks down. It’s usually empty around this time.”

Shizuku fell into step beside him.

As they walked, the noise of Miyamasuzaka softened behind them, voices fading, footsteps dissolving into distance.

Leaves rustled ahead.

As soon as they arrived.

The park was quiet.

Yuu stepped onto the gravel path and slowed, as if giving the space time to accept them.

He chose the swing on the far end, the one half-hidden by overhanging branches, and sat down, the seat dipping under his weight.

It rocked once... then twice.

Shizuku lingered for a moment.

Then she sat on the neighboring swing, not using it, just resting there, hands folded in her lap. The borrowed cap shaded her eyes, turning the world a little dimmer, a little kinder.

For a few seconds, neither of them spoke.

The silence was a bit awkward but it felt offered.

Yuu pushed the swing just enough to make it sway, his feet brushing the ground.

“So, What happened?”

Shizuku’s fingers tightened.

She stared at the dirt beneath her shoes, at the faint arc her toes had traced without realizing it. Her breath caught, then steadied—caught again.

“…I fought with a friend,” she said quietly.

The swing creaked as Yuu shifted his weight, turning slightly toward her—but he didn’t interrupt.

“She said things she didn’t mean,” Shizuku continued, words coming slowly now, like stepping stones across water. “And I said things I didn’t mean… but they still hurt.”

Her voice wavered. She swallowed.

“I know she’s in pain,” she went on. “I know why she’s angry. But when she said I wouldn’t understand… that everything came easily to me…”

Her hands curled into the hem of her skirt.

“It felt like she erased everything I struggled with. Like all the times I was scared, or lost, or trying not to disappoint anyone… didn’t count.”

The swing chains chimed softly as the breeze passed through.

Yuu let the silence settle again before speaking.

“…You don’t look like someone who’s had it easy."

Shizuku blinked.

Slowly, she lifted her head.

“…You think so?”

Yuu nodded once.

“People who’ve never struggled don’t run until they can’t breathe, They don’t break down over words that hit too close to home.”

He leaned back slightly, eyes tracing the branches above them.

“They also don’t keep going as long as you have.”

Shizuku’s lips trembled.

A small sound escaped her, half laugh, half sob, as she pressed the heel of her hand to her eye.

“…That’s unfair,” she murmured. “You say things like that so easily.”

Yuu glanced at her.

"So I've been told."

Yuu let the swing slow on its own, boots dragging lightly through the dirt until it stilled.

“But… Yuu let the swing slow on its own, boots dragging lightly through the dirt until it stilled.

“But…” he said, voice quieter now, almost hesitant, “Hinomori-san… this is just a tip from a stranger like me.”

Shizuku’s shoulders tensed at the honorific. She wiped at her eyes quickly, then laughed under her breath—soft, embarrassed.

“…You don’t really feel like a stranger,” she admitted.

Yuu didn’t respond to that right away.

He rested his elbows on his knees instead, fingers loosely interlaced, gaze lowered—not avoiding her, just choosing his words carefully.

“When people say things in anger, they’re usually talking about themselves. Their fears. Their regrets. Their sense of being left behind.”

He glanced at her then, briefly.

“It doesn’t mean your pain is smaller. It just means they couldn’t see past their own.”

The cap slipped a little as Shizuku nodded, and she adjusted it instinctively. The brim cast a soft shadow over her eyes, but it couldn't hide the way they glistened.

"…Airi isn't cruel," she said. "She's just… hurting. And I knew that. I still snapped."

Her fingers curled together again. "I keep telling myself I have to be strong. That as an idol, I should always smile. Always understand."

Yuu tilted his head slightly.

"Who told you that understanding means never getting hurt?"

She froze.

The question lingered in the air, heavier than it sounded.

"I…" Shizuku started, then stopped. Her lips parted, but no answer came.

The park seemed to lean in around them—the hush of leaves, the distant laughter of children, the slow creak of empty swings.

Yuu stood, stepping off the swing, and held out a hand—not to pull her up, just there, steady.

"You're allowed to be hurt, and you're allowed to take time before forgiving. Being kind doesn't mean disappearing."

"Thank you."

Yuu pushed back from the swing, the chains creaking softly in protest as he straightened.

"Well then… that's enough for me."

"I'll be heading off now. I hope I don't get to see you crying again."

Without waiting for a reply, he lifted one hand in a casual wave, the movement precise, almost effortless.

Shizuku stared at his retreating back.

"…What a strange boy," she murmured.

A small, breathy laugh escaped her—surprising even herself.

"Thank you… Yuu Hazuki-kun," she said quietly. "I know what I should do from now on."

Chapter 74: The Heart of MORE MORE JUMP!

Yuu kept walking, hands tucked into his pockets as the park gradually faded behind him.

"I wonder if my advice worked."

He thought as his eyes lifted briefly toward the sky.

A soft crackle sounded at his wrist.

“I think it’s fine.”

The voice glitched slightly, digital static bleeding between syllables. Yuu slowed, glancing down at his smartwatch just as light flickered across the screen.

Pixels warped, then settled, and the Glitching Miku appeared, small, semi-transparent, and faintly unstable.

“You’re overthinking again,” she added, tilting her head with a gentle smile that didn’t quite hide the distortion rippling at her edges.

Yuu let out a quiet breath, something between a sigh and a laugh. “Yeah… maybe.”

(With this… I should leave them alone and let the story flow on its own.)

Yuu took a step back. not physically, but narratively. He resisted the urge to interfere, to nudge events the way he always did. For once, he simply watched.

And so, over the next two days, He only observed how things would go without interfering this time.

Time moved quietly, yet decisively.

Airi’s spark reignited, not through grand speeches or sudden miracles, but through Minori’s unrelenting sincerity.

That clumsy optimism, that stubborn belief, chipped away at the walls Airi had built around herself.

And Shizuku…

Shizuku left Cheerful * Days.

The news rippled outward, subtle but unmistakable, like a crack forming beneath calm water.

By the third afternoon, Yuu sat alone on a low concrete ledge near a convenience store, summer heat clinging to his skin.

A half-melted popsicle dripped sticky sweetness down his fingers as he scrolled through his phone. Headlines blurred past until one made him stop.

A photo of Shizuku stared back at him—composed, beautiful, distant. Carefully chosen words filled the article, polished and impersonal, hiding more than they revealed.

“But still…” Yuu muttered, biting into the popsicle without really tasting it. Cold seeped into his teeth as his brows knit together. “It’s weird.”

Two days. No distortions. No glitches tearing at the edges of reality. No anomaly forcing his hand.

He exhaled slowly, eyes narrowing as he locked his phone and stared ahead. “An entire story arc, and nothing’s shown up…”

The absence itself felt wrong.

“If this keeps following the script, then Airi will confront Shizuku soon. Minori and Haruka will be there too.”

The popsicle snapped softly as he broke off another piece.

“And Airi will blame herself.”

“Though she’ll probably head to Cheerful * Days Theater to confront them,” Yuu murmured, eyes unfocused as he stared ahead. “Haruka will try to protect Minori—tell her not to come along. Say it’s better if she stays out of it.”

He let out a quiet breath, already seeing the scene play out.

“But Minori won’t listen. She’ll insist. Because she wants to understand—what it really means to be an idol, even when you’re not standing on a stage.”

A faint electronic hum answered him.

“You really know the flow, Yuu," the glitching voice of Miku replied from his smartwatch. There was no hologram this time—just her voice.

“Well…” Yuu scratched the back of his neck. “I did read the story for the crystals.” A small, self-aware smile tugged at his lips. “But I kinda got hooked in the end.”

A brief pause.

“So,” Miku asked, “what’s the plan now?”

Yuu’s gaze sharpened. “To keep watch until the end.” Then his voice dipped, slower, more cautious. “Though… there’s something on my mind.”

“Oh?” Static flickered faintly through her tone. “What is it?”

Yuu’s fingers curled slightly around the edge of his phone.

“The stalker incident of ASRUN.”

“Should I wait it out… or—”

The thought trailed off before it could finish.

Somewhere nearby, cicadas cried out in uneven rhythm, their noise filling the silence he refused to acknowledge. The popsicle in his hand had melted down to a sticky mess, syrup clinging to his fingers, but he didn't notice. His mind was already elsewhere—pages ahead, scenes overlapping, outcomes stacking on top of each other like transparent sheets.

Waiting was the safest option.

Waiting was what the story wanted.

If he did nothing, things would still move. Confrontations would happen. Words would be said. Feelings would collide and reshape themselves the way they always did. Painful, yes—but necessary. Clean. Scripted.

Yet—

His grip tightened.

"…But if I wait," he muttered, barely louder than the hum of the city, "then I'm choosing to let it happen."

The problem wasn't that he didn't know the future.

The problem was that he did.

Yuu exhaled slowly, staring at the reflection of the sky on his darkened phone screen. Blue, clear, deceptively calm. Just like the days before everything broke.

"…Stories aren't supposed to hurt this much," he said to no one.

A pause.

Then, softer—almost to himself:

"But people do."

He straightened, wiping his hand against his jacket, smearing melted sugar across the fabric without care.

"Fine… I'll let it flow on its own."

Yuu stopped beneath the shade of a roadside tree, its leaves whispering softly as the wind passed through them. Sunlight filtered down in broken pieces, freckling the pavement at his feet. He looked up, squinting slightly, as if searching for an answer written somewhere in the sky.

"A week," he murmured. "Give it a week, and it'll probably be finished."

The words sounded light—but they didn't feel that way.

He slipped his phone back into his pocket and leaned his head against the rough bark behind him.

"…This is what you wanted, right? For me to stop touching things."

He pushed himself upright and took a step forward, then another, committing to motion before doubt could pull him back again.

If the story flowed on its own, then all he could do was watch.

And hope, quietly, selfishly, that when the week ended, nothing irreversible would be left behind.

A full week passed.

Yuu sat motionless at his desk in Kamiyama High, the hum of the classroom washing over him like static.

His thumb scrolled endlessly across his phone screen.

"…No news," he muttered under his breath, shoulders sinking. "Should I just interfere after all…?"

Article after article slid past—concert recaps, entertainment gossip, recycled headlines.

It was all nothing.

His grip tightened around the phone, frustration pooling quietly in his chest.

Then—

"Wait."

His thumb stopped.

A headline caught his eye.

A new idol group rumored to be forming—

Yuu tapped it without hesitation.

The page loaded.

His eyes widened.

"…No way."

The names stared back at him, clean and undeniable.

Minori.
Airi.
Shizuku.

His breath hitched.

"What about Haruka?!" The words slipped out louder than he meant them to, sharp enough to cut through the classroom's low murmur.

"Uh."

A hand tapped his shoulder.

Yuu jolted, realization crashing down on him all at once. Too loud. Too careless. He quickly bowed from his seat, flustered.

“S-sorry for being loud.”

“No… it’s fine.”

Yuu looked up.

It was Toya.

(Ah. Right. We’re in the same class.)

For a brief moment, Toya studied him—calm eyes lingering a second too long.

“By the way,” Toya said slowly, “you seem familiar… Do we know each other by any chance?"

Yuu’s pulse spiked.

The room felt suddenly too bright, too quiet, every sound sharpening at once. He forced a smile onto his face, casual, practiced.

“Come on now, Aoyagi-san,” he said lightly. “We’re classmates, right?”

“…You’re right.”

Toya nodded, the thought seemingly dismissed, and turned toward the door. His footsteps faded into the hallway.

Only then did Yuu exhale.

“That was close,” he muttered, sinking back into his seat as the classroom noise reclaimed him.

(But this is bad…)

Yuu’s fingers curled slowly around the edge of his desk.

(Why isn’t Haruka with them?)

The question refused to settle, scraping against the inside of his mind like a needle caught in a groove.

This wasn’t how it was supposed to go.

He stood up.

The chair legs shrieked softly against the floor as he slipped past his classmates, head lowered, steps quick and deliberate. The hallway felt longer than usual, every second stretching thin as unease crept higher up his spine.

The boys’ bathroom was empty.

Fluorescent lights buzzed overhead. Yuu ducked into the far stall, locked the door, and leaned back against it as if the thin metal could ground him. He lifted his wrist.

The smartwatch flickered.

The familiar interface unfolded like a ghostly veil over his vision—clean lines, crystalline icons, a world layered over reality. His thumb hesitated for only a heartbeat before tapping the button he knew far too well.

SEKAI

Another selection.

Stage SEKAI

The air shifted.

Sound drained first—the hum of the lights dissolving into nothing. Then gravity followed, the cramped stall melting away as if it had never existed.

A rush of color surged past him, like light refracted through shattered glass.

And in the next breath—

Yuu was gone.

The sterile tile and locked door were replaced by an endless stage bathed in soft glow, spotlights hovering like distant stars. The familiar expanse of the Stage SEKAI stretched out before him, quiet yet expectant, as if it had been waiting.

Yuu straightened slowly.

"…So," he murmured, eyes narrowing, resolve settling into place. "Guess I'm interfering after all."

"I have to find the Virtual Singers of this place."

The words had barely left Yuu's mouth when his smartwatch pulsed with fractured light. The air in front of him shimmered, pixels stuttering in and out of alignment, until a familiar silhouette forced itself into focus.

"M—Miku?"

The hologram stabilized just enough to show her smile—flickering, glitching at the edges like a corrupted file struggling to load.

"Yuu!" her voice chimed, layered with static. "You're here!"

"Perfect timing, Who's available in this world right now?"

Miku tilted her head, data fragments rippling through her form. "Currently… Rin."

Yuu's gaze snapped forward. "I see. Where is she?"

Miku lifted one translucent hand and pointed past the rows of seats, toward the heart of the stage itself.
"On the stage."

A breath left Yuu's chest—half relief, half tension.

"Got it."

The hologram dissolved into motes of light, leaving Yuu alone once more. He stepped forward, boots echoing softly as he crossed the polished floor. The spotlights above hummed faintly, warming to his presence, as if the SEKAI itself had acknowledged his decision.

(Please… be here.)

Yuu stepped out from the shadow of the backstage—

—and froze.

Center stage, bathed in warm, golden light, Kagamine Rin spun on her heel, boots tapping against the polished floor as music only she could hear guided her movements. Her voice rang bright and clear through the empty SEKAI, echoing upward into the rafters. She laughed mid-step, twirling with carefree precision, dancing not for an audience—but for herself.

Yuu's breath caught.

"…Woah."

He hadn't meant to say it out loud.

The song ended with a small flourish. Rin slowed, coming to a stop as the last imaginary note faded, a satisfied smile settling on her face.

"That was great, Rin!" a cheerful voice called out.

Footsteps followed, light and hurried.

Rin turned just in time to see Minori jogging toward her, eyes sparkling. "Thank you! I hope it helped!"

(Minori… and Rin?)

Yuu straightened instinctively.

Rin's gaze flicked past Minori—and landed on him.

"Oh?" she said, tilting her head. "It seems we have another visitor."

She waved, smile bright and open. "Hello there!"

Minori followed her line of sight.

The color drained from her face.

"Wait—what?! H-Hazuki-san?!"

Yuu gave a small, polite nod. "Hello, Hanasato-san… Rin."

Minori stumbled over her words, panic and disbelief tangling together. “W-wait, what are you doing here?! Isn’t this… our SEKAI?”

“Yeah,” Yuu replied calmly. “It was yours.”

“T-Then how did you get in?!” Minori blurted. “Did you get Untitled too?!”

“Untitled…” Yuu echoed softly. His eyes lowered, thoughtful. “I see. So the song still hasn’t been born yet.”

He looked back to Rin, his expression sharpening.

“What’s going on here, Rin?”

Rin laughed, waving her hands in front of her as if to physically slow the moment down.

“Okay, okay—hold on! Both of you, calm down first. Let’s break this down one step at a time.”

She cleared her throat, suddenly adopting a mock-serious tone.

“First,” she said, turning to Minori, “you’ve met him already. This is Hazuki Yuu.”

Rin’s eyes flicked back to Yuu, then she smiled wider.

“He’s a visitor.”

Minori blinked. “…A visitor?”

“Yup!” Rin continued brightly. “Unlike you—or Haruka, Airi, or Shizuku—Yuu-kun doesn’t need to play Untitled to access the Stage SEKAI.”

The air went still.

Minori stared at Yuu as if seeing him for the first time all over again.

Yuu didn’t bother easing into it.

“Yeah. I have my own ways of entering this SEKAI—but that doesn’t matter.” His gaze sharpened, cutting straight through the lighthearted air. “What happened to Haruka?”

The temperature seemed to dip.

Rin’s confidence wavered. She scratched her cheek with one finger, eyes sliding away.

“E-erm… about that…”

Minori stiffened. “Eh? What do you mean, Hazuki-kun?”

Yuu didn’t look at her—not yet. His attention stayed fixed on Rin, unreadable, patient in the way that meant he already sensed the answer.

“You three formed a group, Didn’t you? You, Airi Momoi, and Shizuku Hinomori.”

Minori's shoulders jumped. "T-That was fast… Headlines sure are impressive," she said with a weak laugh, trying to keep the mood afloat.

Rin let out a small sigh, her usual brightness dimming just a notch.
"It wasn't supposed to happen like that," she said. "At least… not without Haruka."

Minori's fingers curled into her skirt. "We didn't leave her out," she blurted. "Really! It's just—things kept happening so fast, and before we knew it—"

"And Haruka chose not to be there," Yuu finished quietly.

Minori froze.

Rin looked at him, eyes widening a little. "…You really do know the flow, huh?"

Yuu finally looked at Minori then. Not accusing. Just steady.

"She didn't just 'miss the timing,' did she?" he asked. "She stepped back on purpose." He said to Rin.

"Wait... Hazuki-kun, I have a question."

"What is it? Hanasoto-san."

"Does that mean you already knew us? So does that mean those encounters we've had... weren't a coincidence?"

Yuu stayed silent. "Yeah."

"...Who are you really?"

Yuu hesitated.

The question echoed again in his mind—Who am I?

Yuu exhaled, slow and deliberate.

"…I don't have a choice, do I?" he murmured.

He lifted his wrist.

"Miku," he said quietly. "Come out. And… give her the fragment. The one from when I was the assistant manager of MORE MORE JUMP."

The smartwatch flickered.

Static crawled across the air, light warping and stuttering—until a familiar silhouette forced itself into clarity.

Glitching polygons snapped into place, and Miku appeared, her form unstable but unmistakably hers.

"M–Miku?!" Minori gasped. "What happened to you?!"

Miku smiled anyway, gentle, reassuring, even as her edges shimmered unnaturally.

“Hello, Minori!” she said brightly. “I’m Hatsune Miku of Yuu’s SEKAI! Don’t worry—it won’t hurt at all!”

Before Minori could react, Miku stepped forward and placed two fingers lightly against her forehead.

The world shattered.

Memories flooded in all at once, too fast, too vivid.

Late-night rehearsals.

Schedules stacked too tight to breathe.

Backstage hallways filled with nervous laughter and forced smiles.

A quiet boy standing off to the side with a clipboard, offering water bottles, steady words, silent support.

“You did well today.”
“Take a break—you’ve earned it.”

Yuu.

Not a stranger.

Not a coincidence.

Her vision swam as the fragments stitched themselves together, clicking into place like a melody she’d forgotten she knew.

Then—silence.

Miku withdrew her hand and stepped back, the static around her settling.

Minori swayed slightly, eyes closed.

For a heartbeat, nothing happened.

Then slowly… she opened them.

“Huh…?” Her voice was unsteady. “…I’m in… my SEKAI.”

Yuu watched her carefully.

“Hello, Minori,” he said softly. “Do you remember me now?”

Her gaze snapped to him.

“Yuu-kun—” She froze. “Huh?! What’s going on?! Why do I remember all that?!”

Miku let out a small, glitchy laugh. “Looks like it worked, Yuu!”

He nodded once, relief flickering across his face before being replaced by something heavier.

“Yeah, it did.”

He straightened, meeting Minori’s confused, shaken eyes.

“It’s a long story, Hanasato-san,” Yuu said quietly. “So… let’s keep it simple for now.”

And so, Yuu began to explain, while Miku remained at his side, flickering softly like a signal refusing to fade.

He spoke of the beginning of MORE MORE JUMP.

Of dreams stitched together by hope and desperation.
Of Haruka Kiritani, standing at the center of it all—smiling for the cameras while quietly unraveling behind them.

Minori listened, eyes wide, heart pounding as fragments aligned into something sharper than memory.

“Eh?!” she blurted out, panic breaking through her awe. “S-Something’s wrong, Yuu-kun! That’s not— Haruka’s problem wasn’t a stalker! It was because of Mai-chan! I remember Haruka-chan being guilty towards Mai-chan!"

“I know, That’s because I haven’t explained anomalies yet.”

Miku stepped forward, the static around her intensifying, her silhouette warping as if reality itself struggled to keep her contained.

“Anomalies,” she said, voice gentle but carrying weight, “are distortions that interfere with the natural flow of the world. They don’t just change events—they overwrite them.”

Minori swallowed.

“They rewrite causes, replace truths, and twist outcomes until even the people living inside those memories can’t tell what was real anymore.”

“And the scariest part is—they don’t announce themselves. They slip in quietly, changing just enough to push someone toward a different fate.”

Minori’s hands clenched at her chest. “B-Basically… these anomalies are trying to tear the real world apart…?”

“Correct, Minori.”

“These anomalies can alter anyone’s destiny.”

Yuu’s gaze darkened as he finished the thought.

“Just like Haruka.”

Minori didn’t answer right away.

“Minori…?” Rin asked softly. “Are you okay?”

Minori drew in a breath.

Slowly, she lifted her head.

“Yuu-kun.”

“Yes?”

Her eyes were shining, not with fear this time, but with something steadier. Firmer.

“I want to help.”

Rin stiffened. “Minori—”

“I mean it,” Minori said quickly, stepping forward. Her hands clenched into fists over her skirt, knuckles white. “If anomalies can change people’s fates… if Haruka’s suffering because something twisted her path—then I don’t want to just stand there and watch!”

“I became an idol because I wanted to give people hope. If someone is trying to take that away, if the world itself is hurting my friends, then I want to do something. Even if I’m scared. Even if I don’t understand everything yet.”

The Stage SEKAI seemed to respond, the lights subtly brightening, as if listening.

“…Once you step into this,” he said quietly, “you won’t be able to pretend it’s just music anymore. You’ll see things you can’t unsee.”

Minori nodded without hesitation.

“I know.”

Miku drifted closer, her glitching form softening, a gentle smile forming.

“…You really are the heart of MORE MORE JUMP,” she said.

“Alright, Hanasato Minori, then I’ll accept your help.”

“I’m looking forward to your cooperation,” Yuu said, a small smile breaking through the weight he usually carried.

Minori nodded, bright, earnest, terrifyingly sincere. The kind of resolve that didn’t know how to quit.

A few minutes later, the world stitched itself back together.

The Stage SEKAI faded like a dream dissolving at dawn, lights dimming, air thinning—until Yuu was walking the familiar hallway of Kamiyama High once more.

He slipped his hands into his pockets and kept walking, pace unhurried, expression neutral. Just another student heading back to class.

(Like nothing happened.)

Yet the echo of it lingered.

Minori's voice. Her eyes. That stubborn warmth that refused to bend, even after being shown the fractures beneath reality.

Yuu exhaled quietly, gaze drifting toward the classroom door ahead.

"…Minori sure is something," he murmured to himself.

Chapter 75: Back To Where You Belong

The next day arrived quietly.

Or so Yuu thought.

The final bell had already faded into memory as he stepped through the school building, the late afternoon light slanting low and gold across Kamiyama High. Students filtered past him in loose clusters—voices overlapping, footsteps unhurried, the air carrying that familiar end-of-day calm.

His steps slowed as his eyes lifted toward the school gates.

There—standing just beyond the iron bars, framed by the glow of the setting sun—was a familiar figure. Hands clasped in front of her, posture straight but expectant, as if she'd been waiting not for someone, but specifically for him.

"…Don't tell me," Yuu muttered under his breath.

He changed course and walked closer.

The figure turned.

Bright eyes met his.

"Hanasato-san."

"Hello, Yuu," Minori replied, smiling like this was the most natural thing in the world.

He stopped a few steps away, studying her, not surprised so much as resigned.

"What are you doing here?"

"We're gonna make a plan, of course!"

The word landed heavier than it should have.

"Right, you know we could've just done it in the Sekai, right?"

"I know, but wouldn't it be thrilling and cool if we do it in real life too?"

"Hahaha... Alright."

Minori rocked forward on her heels, hands clasped tighter, like she'd been holding this excitement in all day.

"So!" she said, leaning in just a little. "First things first—we walk. Planning goes better when you walk."

"That's a theory," Yuu replied dryly, but he turned anyway, falling into step beside her.

Minori looked up at it, eyes shining. “Isn’t it pretty? It feels like something important always happens at this time of day.”

“That’s usually when things go wrong,”

“Then it’s perfect timing!”

He glanced at her from the corner of his eye. She was walking with purpose now, stride light but determined, like someone who’d already decided the ending and was just filling in the steps to get there.

“…You’re serious about this."

“Of course I am.” She nodded firmly. “You showed me the truth. About Haruka. About the anomalies. About how things can go wrong even if you try your best.” She paused, fingers curling into her skirt. “So if I know that… I can’t just pretend I don’t.”

“…You know helping means things might get harder, You might get hurt."

Minori swallowed—then smiled anyway.

“Then I’ll push back harder.”

For a second, Yuu said nothing.

Then he huffed out a short laugh, running a hand through his hair. “You really don’t know when to quit, do you?”

“Nope!” she said brightly. “That’s my best feature.”Yuu stopped walking.

Minori took two more steps before realizing, then turned back, startled.

“Yuu?”

He studied her for a long moment.

"Nothing... Let's think this through."

They slowed near a quiet intersection, the pedestrian light blinking red while cars passed in streaks of reflected gold.

“By the way, Hanasato."

“Minori.”

“Huh?”

“Minori,” she repeated, a little more firmly this time.

He blinked once.

“…Minori.”

A satisfied nod. “What is it?”

He glanced ahead, tone shifting back to business. "…Does Momoi and Shinomori know about this?"

Minori tilted her head.

"Momoi… and Shinomori…?"

He corrected himself with a faint sigh. "Airi. And Shizuku."

"Oh!" She clasped her hands behind her back. "Nope."

The pedestrian light turned green, but Yuu didn't move right away.

"You didn't tell them?"

"Not yet."

"That's risky."

"I know," she admitted. "But… if we suddenly start talking about anomalies and rewritten fate, they might think we've been rehearsing sci-fi scripts instead of idol songs."

Yuu almost smiled.

"Fair."

She stepped off the curb, and he followed.

"I want to understand more first. If we bring them in, I want to be able to explain it properly. I don't want to scare them."

He studied her from the corner of his eye.

"You're protecting them."

She blinked. "Well… yeah."

"That's usually Haruka's role," he said quietly.

Minori's steps faltered for half a beat—but she recovered.

"Then maybe it's my turn," she replied.

The evening breeze tugged at her ribbon, catching the last threads of sunlight.

Yuu looked forward again, expression unreadable, but something in his shoulders eased.

"…All right, for now, it stays between us."

Minori beamed. "Operation Save Haruka, secret version!"

He sighed, but didn't object.

Minori walked beside Yuu with surprising focus, her earlier excitement settling into determination. She clasped her hands behind her back, gaze forward, brows slightly knit as if rehearsing thoughts before speaking them aloud.

“So…” she began carefully. “How do we save Haruka?”

“There are two problems,” he said at last. “Not one.”

“Two?”

He raised a finger.

“First—Haruka herself.”

Another finger followed.

“Second—the anomaly influencing her story.”

Minori nodded slowly, absorbing every word.

“Haruka stepping away isn’t random. She believes leaving is the correct choice. That distancing herself protects everyone else.”

“…That sounds like her,” Minori murmured.

“She carries responsibility like it’s gravity. The brighter she shines, the heavier it becomes.”

The wind stirred gently between buildings, lifting strands of Minori’s hair.

“So what do we do?”

Yuu stopped walking.

Minori halted beside him, blinking in surprise as he turned slightly toward her.

“You don’t try to convince her she’s wrong.”

“…Eh?”

“If you argue against her decision directly, she’ll retreat further. Haruka doesn’t respond to pressure. She responds to sincerity.”

Minori’s expression tightened with concentration.

“So… I shouldn’t say ‘come back to being an idol’?”

“Exactly.”

He nodded once.

“Instead, show her why you want to stand beside her.”

Her eyes widened slightly.

“Not as a fan,” Yuu added. “Not as someone chasing her shadow. As Minori Hanasato, an idol choosing her own path.”

The words lingered between them.

Minori pressed a hand lightly against her chest, as if testing how they felt inside.

“…I think I understand, “If Haruka sees that I’m serious… she might stop trying to protect me by leaving.”

Yuu gave a small approving hum.

“Good deduction.”

She brightened immediately. “Hehe.”

But then her smile softened.

“…And the second problem?”

Yuu’s gaze lifted toward the darkening sky.

“The anomaly.”

The air seemed to cool slightly around him.

“In the original flow, Haruka’s struggle came from guilt for her colleague, but now there’s an external trigger—the stalker incident. Something inserted into the narrative.”

Minori’s shoulders stiffened. “So it really is dangerous…”

“Yes.”

His answer came without hesitation.

“But that part isn’t yours to carry.”

She looked up at him. “Yuu-kun?”

He met her eyes calmly—steady, grounded in a way that made his next words feel less like reassurance and more like a promise already decided.

“I’ll handle the stalker anomaly.”

Minori stopped walking entirely.

“…By yourself?”

“That’s my role,” he said. “Anomalies react to irregularities. I’m already one. It’s safer if I’m the one they focus on.”

The streetlight above them flickered softly to life, illuminating his expression—calm, almost detached, yet unmistakably resolute.

Minori frowned.

“But that sounds dangerous.”

“It is.”

He said it so plainly that she didn’t know how to respond.

After a moment, he added more gently,

“You focus on saving Haruka’s heart. I’ll make sure nothing interferes with her future.”

Silence followed.

Cars passed. Somewhere nearby, a bicycle bell rang.

Minori looked down, thinking hard.

Then—

She stepped forward and stood directly in front of him, forcing him to stop.

“You’re not doing it alone,” she declared.

Yuu blinked.

“I know you said it’s your role,” she continued, voice firm despite the softness in her eyes, “but idols don’t shine alone. And neither should… whatever you are.”

He let out a quiet breath that almost resembled a laugh.

“…That stubbornness,” he said. “You really are becoming an idol.”

Minori grinned.

“More and more!”

For the first time that evening, Yuu smiled openly—small, fleeting, but genuine.

“…Fine,” he conceded. “You can help.”

“Yes!”

“But,” he added, raising a finger, “when it comes to the anomaly itself, you step back. That’s non-negotiable.”

She puffed her cheeks slightly.

“…Okay. Deal.”

With that, the two started planning.

Their footsteps gradually slowed as the conversation deepened, shifting from simple ideas into something far more deliberate.

What began as scattered thoughts slowly formed into a plan.

A fragile one, but a plan nonetheless.

— Minori's Perspective —

Several days later.

The familiar rhythm of music filled the practice room.

Bright fluorescent lights reflected against the polished floor as the speakers played the instrumental track on loop. Every beat echoed clearly between the mirrored walls.

Minori stepped into the room with light, quick steps.

She set down her bag near the wall just as two familiar voices greeted her.

"Ah, Minori!"

The elegant voice belonged to Shizuku, who stood near the mirrors adjusting her practice jacket. Beside her, Airi was stretching her arms above her head.

Airi tilted her head immediately.

"Hm? Minori, you're in a good mood today. Did something happen?"

Minori froze for half a second.

Her smile stretched just a little wider than usual.

"Hehe~ Mmm! Nothing!"

Airi squinted.

That answer had definitely triggered her suspicion.

"Nothing?" Airi repeated slowly.

Shizuku giggled softly behind her hand. "It does seem like you're hiding something."

Minori waved her hands quickly.

"N-no really! It's just… I'm feeling motivated today!"

Which wasn't exactly a lie.

Her heart thumped as Yuu's words replayed in her mind.

(Show her why you want to stand beside her.)

Minori clenched her hands slightly.

(Not as a fan but as Minori Hanasato.)

Her reflection stared back at her in the mirror—determined, nervous, but shining.

Airi leaned closer, inspecting her face like a detective.

“Hmmm…”

Then she suddenly snapped her fingers.

“You talked to Haruka, didn’t you?!”

“Wha—?!”

Minori jumped so hard her shoes squeaked against the floor.

“I—I didn’t say that!”

“Suspicious!”

Shizuku laughed gently. “Airi-chan, you’re interrogating her.”

“But look at her!” Airi insisted. “She’s glowing like she just unlocked a secret route in a game!”

Minori’s face turned red.

“I’m not glowing!”

But despite her protests, the excitement inside her couldn’t be hidden completely.

Because she knew something now.

Minori quietly clenched her fist.

(Just wait, Haruka-chan.)

Her eyes shimmered with determination.

(This time…)

A brief silence settled in the practice room.

The music track had ended without anyone noticing, leaving only the quiet hum of the speakers and the distant echo of voices from other studios down the hall.

“By the way… is that guy still around?” Airi asked casually, wiping the back of her hand across her forehead.

Minori blinked.

(That guy…?)

Shizuku tilted her head slightly in curiosity.

“Hazuki Yuu-kun? I haven't encountered him lately… why?” she asked gently.

Airi shrugged.

“Nothing, really. Just wondering.”

She grabbed her water bottle and took a quick sip before adding,

“What about Haruka?”

The atmosphere changed instantly.

Shizuku’s expression softened, though a faint trace of concern crossed her eyes.

“She… doesn’t want to talk,” she said quietly. “That’s what she told me.”

The words hung in the air.

Airi let out a long sigh.

“Haaa… I see…”

She set the bottle down and stretched her arms again, her voice returning to its usual blunt tone.

“Well, we can't do anything about it now. If she retires, she retires.”

“Wait!”

The word burst out before Minori could stop herself.

Both girls turned toward her at the same time.

Airi blinked. “Huh?”

Shizuku looked surprised. “Minori?”

Minori stood frozen for a second, her hands trembling slightly at her sides.

Her heart pounded loudly in her chest.

The words she had been carrying for days were suddenly standing right at the edge of her lips.

If you argue against her decision directly, she’ll retreat further.

Yuu’s voice echoed clearly in her memory.

Show her why you want to stand beside her.

Minori inhaled slowly.

Then she lifted her head.

“We can’t just… accept it like that!”

Airi raised an eyebrow.

“Minori…”

“If Haruka-chan says she wants to quit… then I want to hear it properly!” Minori continued, her voice gaining strength with every word. “Not through rumors. Not through messages. I want to hear it from her directly!”

Shizuku’s eyes widened slightly.

Airi crossed her arms.

“And what if she does say it to your face?” she asked.

The question landed heavier than the others.

Minori hesitated.

For a moment.

But then she clenched her fists.

“…Then I’ll tell her how I feel.”

Her reflection in the mirror showed a girl whose determination burned brighter than her nerves.

“I want to stand on stage with her.”

Not as a fan.

Not as someone chasing a dream from far away.

But as someone walking the same road.

“So even if she says she wants to quit… I’ll still tell her!”

The room fell silent.

Airi stared at her.

Then—

“…Wow.”

Shizuku placed a gentle hand against her chest.

“Minori…”

Airi suddenly grinned.

“That’s the most idol-like thing you’ve said all week.”

Minori blinked.

“Eh?”

Airi shrugged.

“Running away from problems isn’t our style anyway.”

Shizuku nodded softly.

“If Haruka truly wants to leave… we should at least hear her feelings ourselves.”

Minori’s eyes sparkled.

“So—”

“But,” Airi interrupted, pointing a finger at her.

“You’re the one dragging us into this emotional confrontation.”

Minori straightened instinctively.

“Yes!”

“Which means,” Airi smirked, “you’re leading the charge.”

Minori gulped.

“…Y-Yes!”

Despite her nerves, a smile slowly spread across her face.

The plan Yuu helped her form was starting to move.

— Yuu’s Perspective —

[Flashback — Chapter 33]

The night had been unusually quiet that day.

A gentle breeze stirred the leaves of the trees lining the park, their shadows swaying softly beneath the glow of the streetlights. Above them, the sky stretched endlessly—deep blue fading into black, scattered with quiet stars.

Haruka sat beside him on the wooden bench, her posture straight but relaxed, hands resting loosely in her lap.

For a while, neither of them spoke.

Then—

“Say… Hazuki-kun…”

Her voice came out softer than usual.

Not hesitant.

Just… thoughtful.

“If I ever fall from the stage… or if the others do… will you pick me up?”

Yuu blinked.

The question itself wasn’t what caught him off guard.

It was the way she asked it.

No drama.

No sadness.

Just a quiet request carried by the night air.

He turned his head, studying her.

Haruka wasn’t looking at him.

Her gaze remained fixed ahead, as if she were watching a distant stage only she could see.

Yet the hand resting between them trembled—so slightly that most people might not have noticed.

Yuu inhaled slowly.

“Of course I will."

His voice was steady.

“That’s part of the job, isn’t it?”

The corner of Haruka’s lips curved upward.

“Even if we fall hard?”

Yuu leaned back slightly against the bench.

“I’ll still be there, even if you fall so hard you leave cracks in the stage.”

For a moment, Haruka stared at him—

Then she laughed.

It was small.

Soft.

But genuine enough that it finally reached her eyes.

“Then I’ll rely on you."

“Please do.”

Yuu glanced up toward the star-filled sky.

“Because the truth is… watching you all work this hard… it makes me want to work just as hard to protect it.”

Haruka turned her head toward him then.

Her gaze lingered, searching his expression as though trying to understand something deeper than the words themselves.

“…You’re not what I expected, Hazuki-kun.”

He shrugged lightly.

“I get that a lot.”

Another smile appeared on her face—one that stayed a little longer this time.

Then she stood up from the bench, stretching her arms toward the sky.

“Alright,” she said. “Walk me the rest of the way, Assistant Manager.”

Yuu rose as well, adjusting the strap of his bag over his shoulder.

“Yes, yes.”

He gave a mock sigh.

“As ordered, Kiritani-san.”

[Present Day]

The scent of roasted coffee beans lingered warmly in the air.

Steam hissed from the espresso machine behind the counter, mixing with the quiet chatter of customers scattered throughout the café. Sunlight filtered through the tall front windows, casting gentle golden patterns across the polished floor.

The bell above the entrance door chimed softly.

A figure stepped inside.

Hazuki Yuu.

His eyes scanned the room once.

And immediately found her.

Behind the counter, tying the apron strings behind her back, stood Kiritani Haruka.

Her hair was neatly tied, a simple barista uniform replacing the dazzling stage outfits she once wore. Yet even here—under warm café lighting instead of stage spotlights—there was no mistaking her presence.

Haruka looked up.

For a split second, her expression froze.

“…Hazuki-kun?”

He stepped closer.

“Kiritani-san.”

Her brows slowly furrowed.

“Hazuki-kun, what are you doing here?”

He glanced briefly at the menu board above the counter.

“I heard from a certain classmate that you recently started a part-time job.”

His eyes returned to hers.

“I didn’t expect you to be a barista, though.”

The calm tone only made her expression tighten further.

“…I asked what you’re doing here.”

There was no anger in her voice.

But there was a wall.

A clear, deliberate wall.

Yuu stepped forward until he stood directly in front of the counter.

For a moment, the sounds of the café seemed to fade into the background.

Then he answered.

“I’m here to put you back on stage.”

The words landed between them as a stone dropped into still water.

Haruka’s eyes widened slightly.

Not shocked.

But unsettled.

As if he had just spoken the one thing she had been trying hardest not to hear.

Chapter 76: Trust In Me

— Café, Late Afternoon —

“I see,” Haruka said quietly, her expression returning to something carefully neutral. “Then stop wasting your time. I’m not going to join you… and please get out if you’re not going to order something.”

Her voice was polite.

Professional.

Too professional.

The kind of tone built to keep distance.

Yuu studied her for a moment, the faint clatter of cups and low conversations filling the silence between them. The café lights reflected softly in her eyes—but behind them, something restless flickered.

He exhaled.

“…Are you afraid of the stalker?”

The word slipped out before he could soften it.

Stalker.

Haruka froze.

It wasn’t dramatic.

Just a small pause.

But to Yuu, it felt louder than a shout.

Her fingers tightened around the cloth she had been holding. The color drained slightly from her face, and her eyes widened—not in anger, but in unmistakable fear.

Customers nearby continued chatting, unaware of the sudden tension forming at the counter.

Yuu realized too late.

“Listen to me, Kiritani-san, I’m ser—”

“GET OUT!”

The shout shattered the café’s calm like glass breaking.

Conversations stopped instantly.

Heads turned.

The hum of the espresso machine suddenly felt deafening in the silence that followed.

Haruka stood rigid behind the counter, shoulders trembling, eyes sharp yet fragile—like someone cornered by something only she could see.

Yuu's eyes widened.

Ah.

…Wrong place.

Wrong timing.

He glanced around, noticing the confused stares of customers and coworkers alike.

"…Sorry," he said quietly.

He turned without another word.

Each step toward the exit felt heavier than the last, the wooden floor creaking faintly beneath his shoes. The bell above the door chimed softly as he reached it.

For a moment—

He paused.

His hand rested against the handle, sunlight spilling through the glass and outlining his silhouette.

He didn't look back.

"…I'll handle it," he murmured under his breath, too quiet for anyone inside to hear.

Then he pushed the door open.

A few minutes later—

Yuu sat alone on a weathered wooden bench across the street, the café now just another glowing storefront among many. The golden light of sunset had begun to fade, replaced by the cool blue of approaching night. Streetlights flickered awake one by one, casting long shadows across the pavement.

People passed him without notice.

Students laughing on their way home. Office workers are scrolling through their phones. The distant rumble of buses and motorcycles blended into the steady rhythm of the city.

Life continued.

Unbothered.

Yuu leaned forward slightly, elbows resting on his knees, hands loosely clasped as his gaze stayed fixed on the ground beneath his shoes. A small crack ran along the concrete, splitting into uneven

lines like fractured glass.

He stared at it longer than necessary.

Then he sighed.

"…What am I doing…" he muttered.

The words dissolved into the evening air.

He replayed the moment again, the shock in Haruka's eyes, the fear that surfaced the instant he said that word. He had meant to reassure her, to confront the problem directly.

Instead—

He had cornered her.

A faint, self-deprecating smile tugged at his lips.

"Great job, Assistant Manager," he murmured dryly. "Ten out of ten communication skills."

The irony wasn't lost on him.

Back then, he had stood behind the stage, supporting them quietly, understanding when to step forward and when to stay back.

But now?

He was rushing ahead like someone trying to fix a story he already knew the ending to.

A cool breeze passed, rustling nearby trees. Leaves whispered overhead, brushing together softly.

Yuu leaned back against the bench and looked up at the darkening sky.

"…You asked me to pick you up if you fell," he said quietly, remembering her voice from that night long ago. "But I guess I forgot something important."

Helping someone stand again didn't mean dragging them to their feet.

Silence settled around him.

After a moment, his smartwatch flickered faintly.

Static shimmered in the air beside him before a familiar hologram appeared—slightly distorted, edges glitching like broken light.

"Hmmm… that didn't go very well," Miku said gently, tilting her head.

Yuu let out a small breath through his nose. "You were watching?"

"Of course. I'm your partner, remember?"

He didn't answer immediately.

“…I pushed too hard."

Miku floated closer, her expression soft but thoughtful. “You tried to fight the anomaly directly. But Haruka’s heart isn’t something you can confront like an enemy.”

Yuu closed his eyes.

“I know.”

A pause.

Then his gaze sharpened slightly, the hesitation fading.

“But the anomaly still exists. If I don't save the group, who knows what will happen?"

“I don’t understand, Yuu… why are you taking this all alone?”

Miku’s voice echoed softly inside his mind, quieter than before, like a fading signal carried through static. Her holographic figure dissolved into particles of pale light, leaving only the faint hum of his smartwatch behind.

The night air felt colder without her presence.

Yuu exhaled slowly.

“…Alright,” he murmured, pushing himself upright. “Let’s do this again.”

Not forcefully.

Not recklessly.

This time—properly.

The next few days unfolded with careful precision.

Yuu didn’t confront Haruka again.

He didn’t bring up idols.

Didn’t mention the stage.

Didn’t say the word stalker.

Instead, he simply… existed nearby.

Morning.

The café bell chimed softly as customers filtered in with the early rush. The scent of roasted coffee beans filled the air, warm and grounding. Behind the counter, Haruka moved with practiced efficiency—measured motions, polite smiles, flawless professionalism.

She looked like someone perfectly fine.

Too perfectly fine.

Yuu entered quietly, choosing a seat near the window.

“Welcome—”

Her voice paused for only half a second when she recognized him.

Then it resumed.

“—What would you like to order?”

Neutral.

Distant.

Like speaking to a stranger.

Yuu didn’t react to the shift.

“One hot café latte, please.”

No extra words.

No lingering gaze.

Just another customer.

Haruka nodded, already turning away.

“…Understood.”

Day two.

He showed up again.

Ordered something different.

Thanked her politely.

Left.

Day three.

Rain tapped softly against the windows, blurring the outside world into watercolor streaks. Yuu sat quietly reading from his phone, occasionally glancing outside but never directly at her.

Haruka noticed anyway.

He wasn’t watching her.

Wasn’t trying to talk.

Wasn’t waiting for her shift to end.

He simply came… and went.

Like clockwork.

And somehow, that unsettled her more than his confrontation had.

Behind the counter, Haruka tightened her grip on a cup as she wiped it dry.

(Why is he…)

Ignoring him would have been easy if he had pushed.

If he insisted.

If he acted like before.

But now—

He respected the distance she had demanded.

And that made it harder to maintain her walls.

Day five.

As Yuu stood to leave, their eyes met briefly.

Just a second.

He smiled faintly—not persuasive, not expectant. Just polite.

“Thank you for the drink.”

“…You’re welcome,” Haruka replied automatically.

He left before she could say anything else.

The doorbell rang.

Silence followed.

Haruka stared at the empty doorway longer than she meant to.

The café bell chimed softly as the door opened.

Warm air wrapped around them immediately, carrying the comforting aroma of coffee beans and freshly baked pastries. Afternoon sunlight filtered through the tall windows, turning drifting dust motes into flecks of gold.

Yuu stepped inside first.

Behind him, Minori peeked around his shoulder, her eyes sparkling with barely contained energy—though today, that energy was carefully restrained.

She clasped her hands behind her back.

(Stay natural… stay natural…) She repeated internally.

This wasn’t a confrontation.

That was the plan.

Behind the counter, Haruka looked up at the sound of the bell.

Her professional smile appeared automatically—

—and froze.

For the briefest moment, surprise flickered across her face.

Yuu… and Minori.

Together.

Minori noticed her immediately.

Of course she did.

Her heart jumped.

Her feet almost moved forward on instinct—

—but she remembered the plan.

No pressure.

No forcing conversations.

Just presence.

So instead, she turned toward Yuu with exaggerated focus.

“Wow, the place smells amazing today!” Minori said brightly, leaning closer to him as if deeply invested in the menu board. “What should I get, Yuu-kun?”

Yuu caught the deliberate tone instantly.

He played along without missing a beat.

“Hm… something sweet suits you,” he said thoughtfully. “Maybe strawberry shortcake.”

“Eh?! You think so?” Minori beamed, leaning closer as if discussing something extremely important. “Then you have to help me decide aon drink too!”

Haruka stood silently behind the counter, menu pad in hand.

Waiting.

Watching.

They approached.

Her posture straightened automatically.

“…Welcome. What would you like to order?”

Her voice was calm—perfectly neutral—but her fingers tightened slightly around her pen.

Minori looked at Yuu instead of her.

“I’ll have the strawberry shortcake set!” she said, smiling toward him.

“And a caramel latte,” Yuu added casually. “Hot.”

Haruka wrote the order down.

Not once did Minori force eye contact.

Not once did she bring up idols.

Or practice.

Or the stage.

Just another customer.

Just another afternoon.

“…Understood,” Haruka said quietly.

She turned away to prepare the drinks.

At their table near the window, Minori leaned forward immediately.

“Is this really okay?” she whispered. “Ignoring her feels kinda mean…”

Yuu shook his head slightly.

“It’s not ignoring."

Minori blinked.

“When someone feels cornered, every word sounds like pressure. Right now, Haruka needs proof that being near us doesn’t mean being forced back onto the stage.”

Minori followed his gaze.

Haruka moved carefully behind the counter, focused on her work—but now and then, her eyes flickered toward their table.

Quick.

Unconscious.

“…She’s listening,” Minori whispered.

“Exactly.”

Haruka placed their order on a tray.

Her steps slowed slightly as she approached.

The closer she got, the clearer their conversation became.

“…and then Airi just stared at me like I’d said something weird,” Minori laughed softly.

“You did say something weird,” Yuu replied calmly.

“Eh?! That’s unfair!”

Their laughter was light.

Easy.

Normal.

No mention of idols.

No expectations.

No disappointment.

Just… ordinary life continuing without her.

Something inside Haruka tightened.

She set the tray down carefully.

“Your order.”

“Thank you!” Minori said brightly—still not pushing further.

Just gratitude.

Just warmth.

Haruka nodded and turned to leave—

“…Kiritani-san.”

She paused.

Slowly.

“…Yes?”

Yuu didn’t look up immediately. He simply stirred his drink once before speaking.

“The latte smells good today.”

A simple comment.

Nothing more.

No hidden meaning.

No persuasion.

Haruka hesitated.

"…Thank you."

She walked back to the counter.

But her steps were slower now.

Less certain.

Minori watched her go, eyes soft.

"…She didn't run away."

Yuu took a quiet sip of his drink.

"Yeah," he said.

Outside the window, the late afternoon sun dipped lower, shadows stretching across the street.

And for the first time since leaving the stage—

Haruka remained in the same space as them… without fear driving her away.

A small step.

Almost invisible.

But real.

Yuu's gaze shifted briefly toward the café entrance, expression sharpening for only a fraction of a second.
The glass door reflected more than passing pedestrians.

For a moment, the reflection distorted—
a ripple across the glass, like static crawling over a screen.

Yuu's eyes narrowed slightly.

(Huh…?)

The shape vanished as quickly as it appeared, leaving only the ordinary street outside—students walking past, bicycles rolling by.

(…Was that my imagination?)

“Yuu-kun? What’s wrong?”

He blinked, pulled back into the present.

Across from him, Minori tilted her head, concern written plainly across her face.

“Mmm… nothing,” Yuu said, resting his chin lightly against his hand. Then, as if changing topics on a whim, he added, “I was going to ask—when’s your next debut? …MORE MORE JUMP failed last time, right?”

Minori puffed her cheeks slightly at the blunt wording.

“H-Hey! When you say it like that, it sounds really bad!”

Yuu chuckled.

“But don’t worry!” she continued, fists tightening with renewed determination. “We’ll get it this time! Just you watch!”

Her eyes shone—not with blind optimism, but with something steadier now. Resolve forged through setbacks.

Yuu smiled faintly.

“Of course,” he said. “I’m cheering you on.”

“Yeah!”

The word came out bright and unwavering.

At the counter, Haruka paused mid-motion while arranging cups. She didn’t turn around—but her hands slowed, listening despite herself.

Bzzzt.

A sudden ringing sound broke the moment.

Minori jolted upright.

“AH!” She scrambled for her phone, nearly knocking over her fork. “It’s already time!”

Her eyes widened as she read the screen.

“I gotta go, Yuu-kun! Airi-chan said I’m not allowed to be late again!”

“Practice?” Yuu asked, already knowing the answer.

“Yeah!”

He covered a small laugh behind his hand. “Pfft… sounds like Momoi-san.”

“Hehe~ right?” Minori stood quickly, grabbing her bag and nearly forgetting her jacket before rushing back for it. “See ya!”

She waved energetically and hurried toward the exit.

The café bell chimed again as she disappeared into the evening crowd.

“Hey.”

The voice came quietly—careful, almost hesitant.

Yuu lifted his gaze from his phone.

Standing at the edge of the alley’s dim light was Haruka Kiritani.

The evening sky behind her had already deepened into shades of violet and blue, the last warmth of sunset clinging faintly to the rooftops. The café’s neon sign hummed softly overhead, casting fractured reflections across the pavement.

“Hm?” Yuu straightened slightly. “Kiritani-san?”

Haruka’s expression remained composed, but her fingers tightened around the strap of her bag.

“I want to talk.”

He studied her for a brief moment—surprised, but not showing it.

“…Alright.”

A small pause followed before she added, quieter this time, “Can you wait for me after my shift?”

“Sure.”

And so he waited.

The back alley behind the café was narrow, tucked away from the main street where customers never wandered. Only employees passed through here—deliveries stacked against the wall, faint coffee grounds scent lingering in the cool air.

Time stretched.

Distant traffic murmured like waves far away. Somewhere nearby, dishes clattered inside the café kitchen.

Yuu leaned against the wall, scrolling absentmindedly through his phone, though his eyes barely registered what was on the screen.

Minutes passed.

Then—

Click.

The employee's door opened.

Haruka stepped out.

Gone was the barista uniform. In its place were simple casual clothes—an oversized cardigan, a skirt swaying lightly around her knees, hair loosened from its work-tied neatness. Without the apron or practiced customer smile, she looked… smaller somehow. More human.

The door shut behind her with a muted sound.

She walked forward, stopping a few steps away from him.

The alley felt suddenly quieter.

"So?" Yuu slipped his phone into his pocket. "What do you want to talk about?"

Haruka didn't answer immediately.

Her eyes searched his face, as if trying to understand something that refused to make sense.

"…You keep showing up," she said at last. "Day after day. Even after I told you to stop."

Her voice wasn't angry.

It was confused.

"This time, you're with Minori… Your intention is very clear, you know?"

A pause lingered between them.

The faint hum of electricity overhead filled the silence.

"…Why?"

The question came softer than expected.

Not accusatory.

Just… lost.

Yuu's gaze lowered slightly.

For a fleeting second, something fragile crossed his expression.

Because you asked me to.

The words slipped from him in a murmur—too soft for the air to carry.

Haruka blinked. "What? Did you say something?"

He lifted his head again, expression already smoothed over.

"It's just a coincidence, I asked Minori out for coffee, and this café seemed to have good reviews, so I invited her here." A small shrug followed. "Is that a problem?"

The reaction was immediate.

"Yes!" Haruka stepped forward, voice rising before she could stop herself. "Yes, it is!"

Her hands clenched at her sides.

“Minori is an aspiring idol! You can’t just invite her out of the blue like that!”

“You’ll cause her to fall before she even gets the chance to rise.”

The alley fell silent again.

A faint breeze passed through, rustling loose papers near the trash bins.

“If you’re that worried,” Yuu said quietly, his voice cutting through the narrow alley’s stillness, “why don’t you go by her side and lead her?”

Haruka blinked.

“Huh? A-Are you listening?!” Her composure cracked, frustration spilling through. “I told you many times! I don’t want to be an id—”

“That’s a lie.”

The words landed instantly.

Sharp. Unhesitating.

Yuu had stepped closer without realizing it, his eyes fixed on hers—steady, unwavering.

“In truth…” his voice lowered, but the certainty within it only grew stronger, “you want to continue being an idol. Don’t you?”

The air froze between them.

Haruka’s breath caught.

— Before this day —

Stacks of articles filled the small table between them, phone screens glowing in the dim café corner where Yuu and Minori sat shoulder to shoulder.

Search results blurred together—old interviews, fan forums, archived news clips about ASRUN.

“Yuu-kun, I found it!”

Minori leaned forward, excitement and tension mixing in her voice.

“What did you find?”

“It’s about the stalker incident.”

Yuu barely reacted. “I already know about that already…”

“No, it’s not just that! Look!” She turned her screen toward him, finger pointing urgently.

He leaned closer.

A smaller headline—almost buried beneath louder speculation articles—filled the display.

[Theory headline: Is it possible that Haruka Kiritani left ASRUN so that the stalker couldn't target her group members?]

Yuu frowned.

"…That's different from the other reports."

Unlike the usual narratives blaming pressure or personal failure, this one read like quiet speculation —unsupported, quickly dismissed.

"But why was this covered up…?" he murmured.

Minori folded her arms, thinking hard.

"Now think about it, Yuu-kun. In the real timeline, Haruka-chan left because she felt guilty about Mai-chan…"

Yuu's eyes widened slightly as the pieces aligned.

"Then does that mean…" he whispered, "…Haruka Kiritani left ASRUN to protect Mai-san?"

Minori nodded slowly.

"That's possible… but we won't know unless we ask her."

Silence followed.

No hesitation—

resolve forming.

Yuu exhaled.

"…Then should we go tomorrow?"

Minori tilted her head. "Go? Where?"

He looked toward the window, where evening lights reflected faintly like distant stages waiting to be lit.

"To her."

— Present —

The memory faded like a page turning.

Back in the alley, Haruka stared at him, unreadable.

"I see…" she said quietly. "So that's your conclusion, right?"

Her expression didn't show anger.

Nor denial.

Only exhaustion—like someone who had spent too long carrying a truth alone.

Yuu didn’t answer immediately.

Instead, he met her gaze head-on.

“You didn’t quit because you hated being an idol,” he said. “You quit because you thought leaving was the only way to protect everyone else.”

Haruka’s fingers trembled.

“You thought if you disappeared,” he continued gently, “the danger would disappear with you.”

The neon light flickered overhead.

Her shoulders stiffened.

“…You don’t know anything,” she whispered, though her voice lacked conviction.

“I know enough,” Yuu replied. “Enough to see that you’re still watching the stage even now.”

His eyes softened.

“You memorize Minori’s progress. You worry about her future. You warn me not to drag her down.”

A small, sad smile appeared.

“People who truly gave up don’t do that.”

Haruka’s breathing grew uneven.

The walls she had carefully built began to crack—not from force, but from recognition.

“You’re wrong,” she said, quieter now. “I’m just… making sure she goes up the stage!"

“Is that really the case?"

Silence stretched long and fragile.

Somewhere beyond the alley, laughter from passing students drifted by—ordinary, distant, untouched by the weight between them.

Yuu took one final step forward.

“And you’re still running, not from the stage… but from going back to it.”

Haruka’s eyes lowered.

For the first time since they started talking—

She didn’t argue.

Yuu lowered his head.

“Fine,” he said quietly, the sharp tension from moments ago fading into something calmer—steadier. “I’m not going to argue anymore. I won’t force you to return to the stage.”

The words surprised her.

For a brief second, the alley felt weightless, as if the pressure surrounding her chest had loosened.

Then he bowed.

Deeply.

Not casually. Not jokingly.

Sincerely.

“But at least…” his voice trembled slightly beneath the bow, “…be by her side until she reaches her dream.”

Haruka’s eyes widened.

“…Kiritani-san, the reason Minori Hanasato wants to become an idol… is because of you.”

The words struck harder than any accusation.

Images flashed through her mind—

Minori is running clumsily through practice.

Minori smiles through exhaustion.

Minori looked at her with shining admiration, a look she never believed she deserved.

“So please, not for my sake. Not for anyone else’s.”

His eyes held hers firmly.

“But for Minori Hanasato.”

Haruka’s lips parted.

Her hands curled tightly at her sides.

“…Then…” her voice faltered, fragile. “…if I did… the stalker would come for them.”

The fear was raw now.

Unhidden.

“I can’t…” she whispered. “I won’t let anyone get hurt because of me."

“…I’ll take care of it.”

Haruka blinked.

“Huh?”

His answer came without drama.

Without pride.

Just certainty.

“I’ll handle the stalker.”

Her brows knit together. “You can’t just—”

“I can,” he interrupted gently. “And I will.”

There was something different in his voice now—something heavier than confidence.

Responsibility.

“Kiritani-san,” he said, calling her name plainly this time, without distance or formality, “I’m asking you one last time.”

He stepped forward into the fading light, shadows stretching behind him like a curtain rising before a performance.

“Be a star.”

The words hung in the air.

Not a command.

Not a demand.

A plea.

For a moment, the world seemed to pause with them—the dim alley, the cooling evening, the quiet space between past regrets and future possibility.

Haruka’s heartbeat thundered in her ears.

Because for the first time since she stepped away from the stage…

Someone wasn’t asking her to shine for fame.

Or success.

Or expectations.

Someone was asking her to shine—

because she already was.

“Fine, I’ll do it… for once… I trust you.”

Her voice was soft, hesitant, yet resolute. The pause between each word carried weight, and Yuu's eyes widened almost instinctively.

"Yeah! Trust me…"

Haruka tilted her head slightly, a small, teasing smile playing on her lips. "You know… this is weird… I feel like we've really met before, and I feel like I've dreamed of this somewhere."

Yuu froze for a moment, a faint fragment of memory flickering behind his eyes—something small, fleeting… like a shadow of the past brushing against the present.

He blinked, forcing himself back to the present.

"Anyway, I'm going home now."

"Wait!" Yuu called out, his tone a mixture of hope and urgency. "Should I tell Hanasato-san?"

Haruka paused, the corner of her lips twitching upward. Slowly, she turned to face him, her finger pressed lightly to her lips in a playful shush.

"I want to see my number one fan's reaction, so no~" she said, the light in her eyes dancing mischievously.

Yuu laughed softly, shaking his head with a quiet smile. "I see."

As she walked away, the alley seemed to exhale, the tension unraveling in the fading glow of the evening sun. Yuu stayed rooted for a moment, watching her silhouette retreat.

– A few minutes later –

The holographic flicker of Glitching Miku buzzed softly from Yuu's smartwatch, glitching in and out like a fragile signal.

"So? Did she finally agree?" her voice asked, carrying that same mechanical warmth.

"Yeah," Yuu murmured, his steps slow but steady. "I feel like… It's going to be alright now."

"I'm glad! Then… what's the plan now?"

"Of course—ensure Kiritani-san's safety."

"I see."

"Anyway… I'm going home now. I want to hear Minori's reaction to Haruka joining them."

"I bet she'll be thrilled," Miku said, fading from his smartwatch with the faint hum of disappearing pixels.

Yuu continued walking.

One foot after another, simple and steady…

Until a sudden, harsh thud shattered the monotony.

The sound was different, sharp, frantic, and immediate, like rubber striking asphalt in panic.

Yuu didn't turn.

There was no time to freeze, no moment to apologize.

A body collided with him violently from behind, slamming into his back.

Air rushed from his lungs in a sharp, stifled gasp.

"Watch it—" he tried, but the words died before they left his throat.

The stranger, if that's what it was, didn't linger.

They vanished as quickly as they'd appeared, leaving only the echo of their impact.

Yuu froze.

He processed the sudden jolt, expecting the usual sting of irritation or the spike of adrenaline. But nothing familiar came.

Instead, a strange warmth unfurled at the small of his back, creeping outward like spilled tea, soft but insistent.

He tried to step forward, but his leg gave way beneath him, collapsing as if gravity had betrayed him.

Reaching back, his fingers brushed against the fabric of his coat. Heavy. Clinging. Wet.

He pulled his hand into the pale halo of the streetlight. The skin of his palm wasn't dirty—it was a deep, glossy crimson, dark and alive under the dim glow.

The air shifted.

Cold.

Sharp.

The tiredness in his body, normally a dull ache, now pressed down like molten lead.

Pain had not yet arrived.

But a heavier, stranger weight had settled into him—the sudden, primal need to sit, to collapse, to let the world stop pressing.

(Huh...)

Chapter 77

“Huh…”

His voice slipped out as nothing more than a fragile breath, barely louder than the wind brushing past the streetlights.

“…I feel… weak.”

The word lingered in the air, unfinished.

Yuu stared at his hand.

For a second, his mind refused to understand what his eyes were seeing.

Dark liquid dripped from his fingertips — slow, heavy drops striking the pavement with soft, obscene taps.

One.

Two.

Three.

“…Blood…?”

The realization arrived late, like a delayed echo.

“Blood…?!”

The world tilted.

Sound dulled, as if someone had lowered the volume of reality itself. Passing cars became distant blurs of light. Conversations faded into muffled noise. Even the glow of the evening streetlamps smeared at the edges of his vision.

Ah.

So that’s why it felt warm.

His knees buckled.

He caught himself against a nearby wall, palm sliding down cold concrete and leaving behind a streak of red. The sensation finally began to arrive—not sharp pain, but a deep, spreading heaviness, like his body was slowly forgetting how to stay upright.

His heartbeat pounded loudly in his ears.

Too loud.

Too slow.

"…That guy…"

The stranger who had crashed into him.

Not a stumble.

Not an accident.

Understanding crept in piece by piece, colder than the night air.

Something had pierced him.

His breathing shortened.

Each inhale felt incomplete, like there wasn't enough air in the world to finish it.

Streetlights flickered above him.

For a fleeting moment, the glow distorted—

static crawling across his vision.

A faint electronic crackle whispered near his ear.

"—Yuu!"

His smartwatch sparked weakly, the hologram struggling to form. Pixels fractured and reassembled until the glitching figure of Miku appeared, her expression strained with alarm.

"Yuu! Your vital signals are dropping!"

He laughed softly—an exhausted, disbelieving sound.

"…So this… is the anomaly?"

His legs finally gave out.

The ground rushed upward.

As he collapsed onto the cold pavement, one thought drifted quietly through his fading consciousness.

(Good…)

(At least Haruka agreed.)

Darkness swallowed him whole.

Sound vanished.

Weight vanished.

Even pain, the heavy, suffocating ache dragging his consciousness downward, dissolved into nothingness.

For a moment, there was only silence.

Then—

Light.

Yuu's eyes snapped open.

Air rushed into his lungs as if he had just surfaced from deep water.

"Huh…?"

The world returned all at once.

"Fine, I'll do it… for once… I trust you."

Yuu froze.

Her voice carried the same hesitation, the same fragile resolve he had heard only minutes ago.

Slowly — almost mechanically — his gaze lifted.

There she was.

Haruka stood before him, illuminated by the fading sunset, her expression gentle yet uncertain, exactly as it had been before she turned to leave.

Not similar.

Not close.

Exactly.

Word for word.

Movement for movement.

(What…?)

His thoughts lagged behind reality.

(Did I just…)

A chill crept down his spine.

(…loop back?)

"Hazuki-kun?"

Haruka tilted her head slightly, concern softening her eyes.

"Are you… okay? You look pale."

The question struck him like déjà vu made real.

Yuu didn’t answer immediately.

Instead, his hand moved on instinct — trembling fingers reaching behind him, pressing against the place where warmth and wetness had spread before.

Where the blade had entered.

(It's not there..)

No blood and dry.

(So I looped..)

Time itself had rewound.

The street around them continued normally — pedestrians walking past, unaware that something impossible had just occurred. The sky still burned orange at the horizon, frozen at the exact same moment fate had once advanced beyond.

Haruka watched him carefully now.

“…Hazuki-kun?”

Yuu blinked, forcing himself back into the present.

He studied her face — alive, unaware, untouched by what he alone remembered.

And beneath the relief came something colder.

If time had reset…

Then the attack—

…was going to happen again.

Yuu moved before reason could restrain him.

His body reacted first.

His hand shot forward—

Warm fingers met hers.

—and he pulled.

“Come with me!”

Haruka stumbled with a startled gasp as momentum yanked her off balance. The world lurched, and before she could even question it, Yuu was already running.

Fast.

“H–Huh?! Hazuki-kun?! What are you—?!”

“I—I can’t explain!” he blurted, breath breaking apart between hurried steps.

The evening crowd fractured around them.

Shoes struck pavement in a frantic rhythm. Conversations cut off mid-sentence as pedestrians turned, surprised by the sudden rush of movement. The golden sunset scattered across glass windows and passing figures, stretching into streaks of amber light as if the world itself struggled to keep pace.

Yuu’s grip tightened around her hand.

Firm.

Unyielding.

His heartbeat thundered so loudly it drowned out everything else.

(Not here.)

His eyes flicked over his shoulder.

Every passerby became a threat. Every shifting shadow carried weight. A running figure in the distance made his muscles tense instantly before relaxing again.

(It happens somewhere around here—right after she leaves.)

The memory surged back with cruel clarity—

A violent impact.

Warmth blooming across his back.

Strength draining from his legs.

Crimson staining his palm beneath a lonely streetlight.

His fingers tightened unconsciously.

Haruka nearly tripped. “W-Wait—slow down!”

Yuu abruptly skidded to a halt at the corner of a quiet side street, pulling her beneath the dim shade of a closed storefront.

The metal shutters reflected faint streaks of sunset, muting the noise of the main road behind them.

Silence rushed in.

Both of them breathed hard, lungs burning, the sudden stillness louder than the chaos they’d escaped.

Haruka stared at him, eyes wide, strands of silver-blue hair clinging lightly to her flushed cheeks.

“What… is going on?” she demanded, confusion trembling beneath her voice. “You suddenly grabbed me and started running—did something happen?!”

Yuu didn’t answer.

He bent forward slightly, hands braced against his knees as he fought to steady his breathing.

His gaze never stopped moving, scanning the street they had just left as though expecting reality itself to betray him.

People walked normally.

Cars rolled past.

Nothing.

No attacker.

(Is it my imagination…?)

His jaw tightened.

(No. I’m sure of it. The attacker will stab me again… I’m sure.)

— Changing to Haruka Kiritani’s POV —

“…Hazuki-kun…”

She spoke softly this time.

Up close, she could see it clearly.

His face was pale — not the tiredness of someone who had run too far, but the colorless strain of someone who had seen something terrifying.

His shoulders trembled faintly.

And his hand—

The one still holding hers—

was shaking.

(His face is pale… and he’s shaking.)

Haruka’s confusion slowly gave way to unease.

This wasn’t impulsiveness.

This wasn’t teasing.

He looked… afraid.

Truly afraid.

Her chest tightened.

“…Did something happen to you?” she asked more gently, her voice losing its sharp edge. “You’re acting like you were trying to escape something.”

Yuu still didn’t look at her.

His eyes remained fixed on the street, sharp and searching — like someone waiting for danger only he could see.

For the first time since meeting him again…

Haruka felt it.

The strange certainty that Hazuki Yuu was standing in a world slightly different from hers.

As if he had already lived through a moment she had yet to reach.

Haruka paused.

So did Yuu.

Kiritani-san? Quick—!”

“Calm down, Hazuki-kun.”

Her voice wasn’t loud.

It didn’t need to be.

It carried a quiet firmness that cut cleanly through the frantic edge of his panic.

“But—”

Before he could finish, Haruka stepped closer.

Both of her hands rose without hesitation.

Soft palms pressed gently against his cheeks.

The sudden warmth stole the rest of his words.

Yuu froze.

Her face was close now—close enough for him to see the steady clarity in her eyes, the faint reflection of sunset light trembling within them.

“Calm down…” she repeated softly.

Not an order.

A reassurance.

Her thumbs rested lightly near his temples, grounding him in place as if anchoring someone drifting too far into a storm.

The noise of the city faded into the background.

Passing cars became distant murmurs.

Footsteps blurred into meaningless sound.

All that remained was her gaze—steady, unwavering.

His breathing faltered once… twice…

Then slowly began to match her rhythm.

“Inhale,” she murmured.

He obeyed without realizing it.

“…Exhale.”

The tightness in his chest loosened just slightly.

Haruka watched carefully, waiting until the tension left his shoulders, until the tremor in his hands softened.

“There,” she said quietly. “You’re back.”

Yuu blinked.

Only then did he realize how close they were.

How warm her hands felt.

How fiercely his heart was pounding for an entirely different reason now.

“…Sorry,” he muttered, averting his gaze.

Haruka didn’t remove her hands immediately.

Instead, her expression softened, concern replacing confusion.

“You looked like you were running from something invisible, If something scared you that much… you don’t have to carry it alone.”

The words struck deeper than she intended.

For a split second, something conflicted flashed across Yuu’s eyes—relief battling against restraint.

He swallowed.

“…I just needed to make sure you were safe.”

Haruka blinked.

“Safe…?”

“…Hazuki-kun,” she said gently, “what exactly are you trying to protect me from?”

Yuu finally looked around again.

The street remained normal.

Haruka slowly lowered her hands from his face, though her gaze never left him.

“…Hazuki-kun,” she said gently, “what exactly are you trying to protect me from?”

“Yuu-kun… I think it’s time.”

A faint electronic chime cut through the quiet alley.

Light fractured in midair above Yuu’s wrist.

Static bled into existence — pixels tearing themselves apart and reforming — until a small holographic figure forced its way into the world.

Miku appeared.

But not as she should have.

Her form flickered violently, colors desynchronizing as if her existence struggled to remain stable. Pieces of her silhouette lagged half a second behind her movements, dissolving into digital noise before snapping back into place.

“Miku?!" Haruka instinctively gets close to the hologram. “Wh-What’s wrong with your body?!”

The hologram glitched again.

Her smile remained gentle, but it trembled at the edges, breaking into fragments of light.

“Hello, Haruka…” Miku said with an awkward laugh, her voice briefly distorting into static. "Don't worry, I'm a Miku on Hazuki Yuu's sekai."

"Sekai..." Haruka repeated the word.

The words carried an exhaustion that didn’t belong to a virtual singer.

Yuu’s expression darkened.

“…I’m sorry, Miku,” he said quietly.

Haruka looked between them, confusion deepening.

“Wait— you two are talking like this is normal,” she said. “What is happening?”

The hologram crackled faintly.

Fragments of light distorted around Miku’s body, her outline breaking into brief strands of static before reforming. Even her twin-tails glitched, lagging half a second behind her movements.

“Yuu-kun,” Miku asked gently, though her voice carried a faint electronic strain, “should I just do it?”

Yuu hesitated only a moment.

“…Yeah, Miku. Do it.”

Haruka blinked. “D-Do what?”

The answer came not in words, but in light.

Miku slowly raised her hand and pointed toward Yuu’s wrist.

A soft chime rang out — like glass touched by sunlight.

Particles gathered above his palm, weaving together into form. Slowly, a shard of translucent glass appeared in his hand, glowing faintly with shifting colors. It wasn’t sharp like a weapon; its edges blurred softly, almost unreal, as if it existed between dream and reality.

The air around it hummed.

“Just point it to Haruka’s forehead and…” Miku said.

“…Yeah,” Yuu finished quietly. “Insert the memory fragment.”

Haruka instinctively stepped back, one hand rising defensively between them.

“W-Wait,” she said, eyes fixed on the glowing shard. “Can someone explain why he’s holding something like that?”

The light reflected in her eyes — gentle, wavering. Not threatening.

Just unfamiliar.

Unexplainable.

Yuu stared at the shard resting in his palm.

Warm.

Alive.

It pulsed faintly against his skin, responding to his heartbeat. It weighed almost nothing, yet lifting his arm felt impossibly difficult — as if the true burden wasn’t physical, but the choice itself.

“Miku…” he murmured, voice low. “Are you sure this won’t hurt her?”

The hologram flickered violently for a split second, static crawling across her form before stabilizing again.

“It won’t,” Miku said softly. “It only returns what already belongs to her.”

Haruka’s expression tightened.

“Returns… what?”

Yuu looked up at her.

For a moment, his hand lowered slightly.

She stood there trusting him — despite understanding nothing. Calm, steady, trying to remain composed even as the impossible unfolded before her eyes.

The same strength she always showed others.

And now…

she was placing that trust in him.

His grip tightened around the shard.

“…A memory,” he said quietly.

His voice softened.

“One you lost.”

Chapter 78: You're not alone

The same strength she always showed others.

And now…

she was placing that trust in him.

Yuu's grip tightened around the glowing shard.

Its pale light flickered softly across his fingers, almost like it was responding to the emotions buried beneath the surface of his heart.

The oldest memory surfaced first.

A rehearsal studio.

The sound of music echoing against mirrored walls.

MORE MORE JUMP laughing together while—

Yuu stood alone near the corner of the room, quietly practicing dance steps when nobody was looking.

Haruka blinked faintly.

"…A memory," Yuu said quietly.

His voice softened.

"One you lost."

Haruka's brows drew together slightly.

"…One I lost?"

Yuu stepped closer.

Carefully.

Gently.

And then—

He touched the shard against her forehead.

A sharp pulse of light exploded outward between them.

The alley vanished beneath blinding white.

Wind roared violently through the narrow street, scattering loose papers into the air while nearby metal shutters rattled loudly from the force.

Haruka's eyes widened.

And suddenly—

Music.

Cheering.

Light.

Stage spotlights blazed overhead, warm and dazzling against the darkness beyond the stage. Thousands of glowsticks swayed beneath the midnight sky like constellations brought to life, their colors blending into a sea of shimmering emotion.

Her breath caught.

She stood at the center of a massive stage.

Beside her was Minori, brightly waving toward the audience, Airi hyping up the audience with her cuteness, and Shizuku gracefully smiled beneath the lights.

MORE MORE JUMP was whole and complete.

Haruka knew instantly this was real.

Not imagination nor a dream.

A memory.

Her memory.

The concert ended in a flood of applause.

The world blurred.

And another memory surfaced.

"Hey, guys, why are we still here?" Airi asked, tilting her head as she peeked through the small glass window of the studio door.

The others stood beside her, half-hidden in the dim corridor.

Inside, Yuu was still moving, his steps steady, breath synchronized with the beat echoing through the room.

Minori pressed a finger to her lips. "Shh… look. He's still practicing."

Haruka's eyes softened as she leaned slightly against the wall, watching the boy's reflection in the mirror. "He's been at it since we finished rehearsal… hasn't even noticed us."

"Geez," Airi muttered, though a small grin tugged at her lips. "He's going to collapse if he keeps this up."

Shizuku chuckled quietly. "Maybe… but look at him. He doesn't seem tired at all."

The studio lights caught faint trails of dust swirling around Yuu as he spun, then stopped abruptly, panting, but smiling faintly to himself.

Airi crossed her arms. “What’s he even trying to do, anyway?”

“Improve,” Haruka said simply. “Little by little. Every time we see him, his rhythm gets sharper.”

Minori’s eyes gleamed. “He’s amazing, isn’t he? It’s like… he’s dancing because he really wants to, not because someone told him to.”

For a moment, the four idols stood in silence—just watching. The faint sound of sneakers against the polished floor echoed like a heartbeat.

Finally, Airi sighed, whispering under her breath, “He’s hopeless.”

But there was no bite in her words—only warmth.

Then, Haruka straightened and turned toward the hall. “Come on. Let’s not distract him.”

As they walked away, Airi glanced back one last time through the window.

Haruka gasped sharply as reality returned all at once.

The alley.

The cold evening air.

Yuu is standing directly in front of her.

Her vision trembled violently.

“…Yuu…” she whispered.

“Welcome back, Kiritani-san.”

His voice carried relief.

The kind that sounded like someone who had spent a long time waiting for confirmation that they hadn’t lost everything.

Haruka looked at him silently for a moment.

Then her brows furrowed slightly.

“Didn’t I tell you to call me Haruka?”

Yuu blinked.

And then—

he laughed quietly.

Not the dry, tired chuckle he usually gave.

A genuine one.

Soft enough that it almost disappeared into the evening breeze.

"…Right."

He rubbed the back of his neck awkwardly before looking back at her properly.

The tension in his shoulders had eased for the first time since the loop began.

"Then…" he said, smiling faintly.

"Welcome back, Haruka-san."

The way he said it made her chest tighten again.

The quiet boy always standing just outside the spotlight.

The assistant manager who stayed later than everyone else.

The one who carried burdens silently so nobody else had to.

And somehow—

even after losing those memories—

he had still chosen to protect her first.

Haruka lowered her gaze briefly.

"…You really did keep your promise," she murmured.

"Hm?"

She looked back up at him.

The memory of that night beneath the stars replayed vividly in her mind.

"If I ever fall down the stage… will you pick me up?"

And his answer.

"Of course I will."

A faint smile touched her lips.

"You picked me back up."

For once—

Yuu didn't immediately deflect the praise.

He simply looked at her quietly, evening light reflecting softly in his tired eyes.

“…That’s part of the job, isn’t it?”

Haruka laughed softly.

“Now that’s done…” Yuu said quietly, glancing toward the mouth of the alley. “We should get out of here…”

The warmth of the moment faded almost instantly.

Haruka noticed it immediately.

The way his posture shifted.

Yuu stepped slightly in front of her without thinking.

A protective habit.

Haruka recognized it now.

The same subtle movement he used backstage whenever crowds became too aggressive.

The same positioning he took during events whenever fans pushed too close.

Back then, she never questioned it.

Now—

she understood.

“Yuu,” she called softly.

“Hm?”

“You’re still afraid.”

He paused.

Only for half a second.

But it was enough.

Haruka watched his hand tighten faintly at his side before he forced himself to relax again.

“…I’m just being careful... That's all."

“That’s not what I said.”

Yuu fell silent.

Haruka got him on that one.

"Then... How about you go to my house and calm down."

Yuu's eyes widened.

Yuu stared at her as though he'd misheard.

"…Your house?"

The words came out quieter than intended.

Haruka nodded once, calm and composed despite the tension lingering in the alley.

"Yes."

The city lights had begun flickering on one by one beyond the narrow street, soft amber glow spilling across the pavement between them. Somewhere in the distance, a train rumbled faintly through the evening.

But Yuu's attention remained fixed entirely on her.

"I-I don't think that's a good idea, It's late, and besides, your family might misunderstand, and—"

"Yuu."

His voice stopped instantly.

Haruka stepped closer.

Not enough to corner him.

Just enough that he could no longer pretend the fear in his expression wasn't visible.

"You're shaking."

Yuu froze.

Only then did he seem to realize it himself.

His fingers trembled faintly at his side, tension still rooted deep beneath his skin from the memory of blood spreading across his back beneath the streetlights.

Haruka's gaze softened.

"…You don't have to carry this alone."

The words hit harder than they should have.

Yuu instinctively looked away.

Because that was exactly what he had been doing.

Since the beginning.

Handling anomalies alone.

Protecting everyone alone.

Failing alone.

“…It’s dangerous,” he muttered weakly. “If the anomaly’s targeting me now, then staying near me might put you in danger too.”

Haruka blinked once.

Then sighed softly.

“…You really haven’t changed.”

“Huh?”

“You still think your first responsibility is protecting everyone else,” she said. “Even now.”

Her expression turned faintly nostalgic.

“In the memories you returned to me… you were always like that.”

Yuu opened his mouth.

Closed it again.

No response came.

Haruka smiled gently at his silence.

Then—

without warning—

she reached forward and took his hand.

Warm.

Steady.

Yuu visibly stiffened.

“S-Seriousl—”

“If you’re worried,” Haruka interrupted calmly, “then stay somewhere safe tonight.”

She intertwined her fingers slightly with his before continuing.

“And right now, I think that’s with me.”

The evening breeze swept quietly through the alley.

For once—

Yuu Hazuki had absolutely no idea what to say.

“With that settled,” Haruka said softly, “come on.”

Before Yuu could properly process the situation—

she pulled him forward by the hand.

“W-Wait—Haruka-san?!”

The alley disappeared behind them as Haruka stepped out into the evening street with calm determination, her grip surprisingly firm despite how elegant she normally appeared.

Yuu stumbled once before catching his balance.

“H-Hold on, seriously, are we actually doing this?!”

“Yes.”

“That answer was way too fast.”

"Do I get a say in this?"

"Nope~"

Haruka glanced back at him.

And smiled.

“It’s your fault for making me remember everything,” she said lightly.

Yuu stared for half a second before immediately looking away.

“…That’s unfair.”

“Hm?”

“Nothing.”

The walk felt strangely unreal to Yuu.

Not because of the city around them, the glowing storefronts, the evening traffic, the soft buzz of conversations drifting through the streets—but because Haruka still hadn’t let go of his hand.

Every few steps, his brain seemed to remember that fact all over again.

And every single time, his thoughts short-circuited.

Meanwhile, Haruka walked calmly beside him as though this was completely natural.

The faintest hint of amusement lingered in her expression.

Yuu noticed.

Unfortunately.

“…You’re enjoying this,” he muttered.

“A little.”

“That’s evil.”

The city gradually shifted around them.

Bright commercial buildings gave way to quieter residential streets lined with trees swaying gently beneath the night breeze. Warm household lights glowed behind windows, and the noise of the city softened into something calmer.

Eventually—

Haruka slowed.

“We’re here.”

Yuu looked up.

A neat modern home stood quietly at the end of the street, warm porch lights illuminating the entrance while ivy curled softly along the fence nearby.

“…Whoa,” Yuu murmured before he could stop himself.

Haruka blinked once.

“What?”

“No, uh—I just…” He awkwardly rubbed the back of his neck. “It suddenly hit me that a real idol actually lives here.”

Haruka stared at him for a moment.

Then she smiled again.

“You say that like you weren’t our assistant manager.”

“…That feels different.”

“How?”

“You were all untouchable stars back then,” Yuu replied honestly. “Meanwhile, I was just the exhausted guy carrying schedules and helping the staffs.”

“Oh? Even though you were glancing at Minori whenever you had a chance?"

Yuu nearly choked on air.

“…Please forget that memory immediately.”

“No.”

“That wasn’t a request?”

Haruka’s shoulders shook slightly from suppressed laughter as she stepped toward the front gate.

Then—

She paused.

Her hand rested lightly against the latch.

“…It feels strange,” she admitted softly. “A few hours ago, I thought all those memories were gone forever.”

Yuu’s expression eased.

“They were never gone,” he said quietly. “Just buried.”

Haruka looked back at him.

Moonlight reflected faintly in her eyes.

“…Thank you, Yuu.”

The sincerity in her voice caught him completely off guard.

Yuu instinctively looked away again.

“…Y-Yeah.”

Haruka smiled knowingly at his reaction before finally opening the gate.

“Come inside before you collapse from stress.”

“I am not collapsing from stress.”

“You're literally fidgeting right now..”

“…Fair point.”

The front door clicked open softly.

Warm light spilled into the night, washing over Yuu as Haruka stepped aside to let him enter first.

“Come in.”

Yuu hesitated at the doorway for exactly three seconds too long.

Haruka noticed immediately.

“…Yuu?”

“S-Sorry,” he said quickly. “I just suddenly realized this is the first time I’ve entered an idol’s house.”

Haruka tilted her head slightly.

“You’ve entered dressing rooms, rehearsal studios, backstage waiting areas, and, importantly, you entered the STAGE SEKAI without permission.”

“…Those somehow felt less dangerous.”

Haruka let out a quiet laugh.

“There’s nothing dangerous here.”

(That’s exactly what makes this dangerous!)

Yuu thought instinctively.

Still, he carefully stepped inside.

The warmth hit him first.

Not just temperature.

The atmosphere itself felt warm.

Soft lighting illuminated a clean, elegant interior decorated with small touches, fresh flowers near the hallway, neatly arranged shelves, calming colors, and faint traces of floral perfume lingering gently in the air.

Yuu removed his shoes carefully by the entrance.

“…This place really feels like you.”

Haruka blinked.

“Like me?”

“It’s calm, Pretty. Organized.” He paused briefly before adding awkwardly, “…A little too perfect.”

Haruka’s shoulders relaxed slightly at that.

“…I’m glad.”

She slipped off her shoes and gestured further inside.

“My parents are still out for work, so you don’t need to worry.”

Yuu immediately straightened.

“Wait, hold on.”

“Hm?”

“You just casually dropped an extremely important detail.”

Haruka looked genuinely confused for a second before realization slowly crossed her face.

“…Ah.”

“‘Ah’ is not enough for this situation.”

Her lips curved upward faintly.

“You really do panic easily when it comes to things like this.”

“I'm a healthy boy, you know?!”

“That’s fair.”

Yuu sighed dramatically while running a hand through his hair.

The exhaustion from the day was finally starting to catch up to him now that the adrenaline had faded. His shoulders felt heavier than before, tension still lingering deep beneath his skin no matter how much he tried to hide it.

Haruka noticed.

Of course she did.

“Sit down,” she said gently. “I’ll make tea.”

“…You can cook?”

Haruka narrowed her eyes slightly.

“That’s rude.”

“No, I mean—”

“I can make tea perfectly fine.”

“…That somehow didn’t answer the question.”

Haruka ignored him completely and walked toward the kitchen.

"By the way, do Airi and Shizuku know about this?" Haruka asked as she started preparing the tea.

"Just you and Hanasato."

The sound of running water filled the kitchen as Haruka reached for the kettle, her movements calm and practiced.

At Yuu’s answer, she paused for only a fraction of a second.

“…Just me and Minori?”

“Yeah.”

From the living room, Yuu leaned back slightly on the couch, staring up at the ceiling as if it might offer him a better explanation for his life choices.

“Well,” he added after a beat, “technically Minori remembers things she shouldn’t, so she counts as a separate category of problem.”

Haruka’s voice drifted back, dry but not unkind.

“That’s a strange way to describe your allies.”

“I prefer ‘people actively involved in my life-threatening situation,’ but ‘allies’ works too.”

A faint clink of porcelain followed as Haruka set something down.

“…So Airi and Shizuku don’t know anything.”

“No.”

A brief silence.

Then Haruka spoke again, softer this time.

“Are you planning to tell them?”

Yuu hesitated.

The question wasn’t simple.

It never was.

Telling them meant pulling them into something they couldn’t unsee. Something that bent time, rewrote fate, and turned ordinary days into fragile things that could break without warning.

And yet—

keeping them in the dark meant carrying everything alone again.

“…I don’t know,” he admitted quietly.

Haruka didn’t respond immediately.

Instead, the sound of the kettle clicking faintly echoed through the kitchen as she turned off the heat.

When she finally spoke, her voice was closer now;, she had started walking back toward the living room.

“You always do that,” she said.

Yuu blinked.

“…Do what?”

“Try to decide everything alone,” Haruka replied simply.

She appeared in the doorway a moment later, holding two cups of tea. Warm steam curled upward between them, softening the space.

“You did it before, even when you were with us.”

Yuu sat up slightly.

“That’s different.”

“How?”

He opened his mouth—

Then closed it.

Because he didn’t have a clean answer.

Haruka placed one cup on the table in front of him and sat down beside him, not too close, but not far either.

The warmth of the tea slowly filled the room.

“…You don’t have to tell them everything right away,” she said after a moment. “But you also shouldn’t carry it alone.”

Yuu stared at the cup.

His reflection wavered slightly on the surface of the tea.

“…That’s easy for you to say,” he muttered.

Haruka hummed softly.

“Is it?”

That made him glance at her.

She took a small sip of her own tea, expression steady—but there was something quieter behind her eyes now. Something that had been buried for a long time and only recently resurfaced.

“I just remembered a lot of things today,” she said. “Things I didn’t even realize I had lost.”

A pause.

“…And in all of them,” she continued, “you were there.”

Yuu looked away immediately.

“Don’t say it like that.”

Haruka tilted her head slightly.

“Like what?”

“Like I’m important.”

A soft silence followed.

Then Haruka spoke, very calmly.

“…You are.”

The word landed heavier than anything else that day.

Yuu didn’t respond.

Not because he had nothing to say.

"Now then... Yuu, what's the plan?"

Yuu stared down at the surface of his tea for a moment, the faint steam curling upward and blurring his reflection.

“…My plan,” he said finally, voice quieter than before, “was to get you back into MORE MORE JUMP.”

Haruka’s hand paused mid-lift.

“…And while that happens, I’ll deal with the anomaly.”

The room fell still.

Even the soft hum of the refrigerator in the background seemed louder in the silence that followed.

Haruka slowly set her cup down.

“…That’s it?”

Yuu blinked slightly.

“…Yeah.”

He hesitated, then added more carefully, as if trying to convince himself as much as her.

“I want you to have your first debut properly. With everyone. On stage. Not like this—” he gestured vaguely, “—half-broken situation where things are missing and people are getting rewritten.”

Haruka watched him quietly.

Her expression didn’t change at first.

Then, slowly—

“…I see,” she said.

Not agreement.

Not rejection.

Just understanding.

Yuu leaned back slightly, exhaling through his nose.

“It’s the least I can do,” he muttered. “Since I already got dragged into this mess.”

Haruka tilted her head.

“You say that like you’re separate from it.”

That made him pause.

“…I am,” he replied automatically.

But the words didn’t sound as certain as he intended.

Haruka didn’t press further.

Instead, she picked up her tea again, holding it gently between both hands.

“…Yuu.”

“Yeah?”

“If you’re going to fight something like that alone,” she said calmly, “you’re going to lose eventually.”

Yuu let out a quiet, humorless breath.

“That’s encouraging.”

“It’s not meant to be encouraging.”

A beat.

Then Haruka continued, softer this time.

“…So don’t.”

“I’ll go back to the stage,” she said. “I’ll do my part.”

A pause.

“And you… stop acting like you’re the only one who has to fix everything.”

Yuu stayed silent for a moment longer.

The warmth of the room felt distant now, like it had shifted into something more fragile—something that could break if spoken to too loudly.

He lifted his gaze and looked at Haruka properly.

Not as someone carrying a burden.

Not as someone trying to fix everything alone.

Just her.

“…Then, I promise I won’t be alone.”

Haruka blinked slightly.

Yuu's fingers tightened faintly around the cup before he continued, voice steadier now.

"…But in exchange, I want you to be the star on stage."

But carrying more weight than either of them immediately spoke about.

Haruka didn't answer right away.

Her expression softened—not into surprise, but something gentler. Something almost nostalgic, like she was hearing a promise she once believed in but had allowed herself to forget.

"…The star," she repeated softly.

Yuu nodded once.

"Yeah."

A small silence followed.

Then Haruka let out a quiet breath through her nose, almost like a faint laugh.

"…You still talk like that," she murmured.

"Like what?"

"Like I was always meant to be something bright," she said.

Her gaze lowered briefly to her cup.

The reflection of the tea trembled slightly as she moved it.

"…When I left ASRUN," she continued, voice quieter, "I stopped believing that for a while."

Yuu didn't interrupt.

Haruka looked back up at him.

"But…"

Her fingers tightened slightly around the cup.

"…If you're going to say something like that," she said, "then I'll do it properly this time."

Yuu blinked.

Haruka's expression steadied.

Not hesitant anymore.

Not unsure.

"I'll stand on stage," she said. "As the star you're talking about."

A pause.

Then, softer—

“So don’t break your promise.”

Yuu let out a breath he didn’t realize he was holding.

“…Yeah,” he said quietly.

“I won’t.”

With that, the conversation slowly settled into silence.

The warmth of the tea lingered in their hands, gradually fading as the cups emptied. Outside, night had fully taken over—streetlights casting soft amber reflections across the window panes, the world beyond the house moving at a calmer, distant rhythm.

Yuu leaned back slightly on the couch, exhaling.

“…I’m gonna sleep here in the living room,” he said at last, voice low with exhaustion finally catching up.

Haruka looked at him from where she stood near the table, blinking once.

“…Okay.”

“That was easier than I expected.”

Haruka began gathering the cups.

“You look like you’re about to collapse,” she replied simply. “Arguing would be inefficient.”

“…Fair.”

He let his head sink back into the couch properly this time, staring up at the ceiling. The tension in his body didn’t disappear immediately, but it loosened—like something heavy had finally been set down, even if only temporarily.

Haruka moved quietly in the kitchen, the soft clink of dishes filling the background. Everything about the house felt calm again, as though the earlier distortions of reality and memory had been carefully sealed behind them for the night.

After a while, she returned, drying her hands on a small towel.

Yuu was still awake, though barely.

“…You’re really just going to sleep there?” she asked.

“Mm,” he replied without opening his eyes. “If I move, I might regret existing tomorrow.”

“That dramatic?”

“Based on today? Yes.”

Haruka stood there for a moment, studying him.

Then she spoke softly.

"…Goodnight, Yuu."

His eyes opened slightly at that.

For a second, he didn't respond.

Then—

"…Goodnight, Haruka."

[Changing perspective to Haruka Kiritani]

The kitchen was quiet now.

Only the faint sound of running water remained as Haruka finished rinsing the teacups and carefully placed them on the drying rack. The warm scent of tea still lingered in the air, soft and calming, blending with the stillness of the late night.

When she turned back toward the living room—

Yuu had already fallen asleep.

He was still sitting on the couch, slightly slouched to one side, one arm resting loosely against his lap. His breathing had finally evened out, tension gone from his shoulders in a way she hadn't seen during the entire day.

For a moment, Haruka simply stood there.

Watching him.

"…You really fell asleep just like that," she murmured quietly.

Careful not to make a sound, she stepped closer.

The room felt smaller now, quieter. The faint glow from the hallway traced soft lines across his face, highlighting how exhausted he truly was beneath all his effort to stay composed.

Haruka hesitated.

Then gently reached out.

Her fingers brushed lightly through his hair—slow, careful, almost absentminded at first. A quiet gesture, like fixing something that didn't need fixing but still felt right to do.

"…Thank you, Yuu," she whispered.

She let her hand linger for a moment longer before slowly pulling away.

Chapter 79: The Brightest Star

Chapter Notes

Warning, this is gonna be a long chapter.

The next morning...

Soft sunlight filtered through the curtains in pale golden streaks, illuminating the living room little by little as the city outside slowly awakened.

On the couch—

Yuu stirred.

A small crease formed between his brows as consciousness returned piece by piece. For a brief moment, instinct took over before thought did.

"Ahh.. Right... I slept at Haruka's house."

He slowly sits up from the couch and taps his smartwatch.

"Miku."

The smartwatch flickered weakly at his touch.

Static crackled across the dark screen for a brief second before pale blue light spilled outward into the quiet living room.

A small hologram materialized above the watch face.

Glitching.

“…Good morning, Yuu-kun,” Miku greeted softly.

Her voice carried the usual warmth, but the interference had worsened again overnight. Fragments of static cut through her outline like cracks running across glass, parts of her figure fading in and out unnaturally.

Yuu noticed immediately.

His expression tightened.

“…You’re getting worse.”

Miku laughed awkwardly, though even that briefly distorted.

“Ehehe… maybe a little.”

“That’s not something to laugh about.”

Sunlight continued drifting across the room, slowly illuminating the exhausted look in Yuu’s eyes. He rubbed the back of his neck before glancing toward the hallway leading deeper into Haruka’s home.

“…Did anything happen last night?” he asked quietly.

Miku shook her head.

“No anomaly activity nearby. It seems stable for now.”

“For now."

“Still…” Miku tilted her head slightly. “You slept properly.”

“…Barely.”

“No, you really rested.”

Yuu paused.

And realized she was right.

Yuu pushed himself up from the couch slowly, one hand rubbing the lingering exhaustion from his eyes.

Morning light spilled warmly across the living room now, illuminating the quiet space where he had somehow managed to sleep peacefully for the first time in what felt like ages.

His smartwatch flickered faintly again.

Miku reappeared above it, tiny static sparks dancing around the edges of her hologram.

“What are you going to do now?” she asked.

“…I’m heading out, tfinish this once and for all…”

Miku’s eyes brightened immediately.

“So cool!” she said excitedly despite the static tearing briefly across her figure. “Then… I’ll help you!”

A small smile finally appeared on Yuu’s face.

“I’m counting on you.”

“Roger!” Miku saluted dramatically.

Then her hologram dissolved into fading particles of light.

Silence returned to the room.

Yuu exhaled softly.

(…Before I leave, I should leave a note for Haruka.)

He hesitated briefly.

Then began writing.

His handwriting started messy from sleepiness before gradually stabilizing.

Haruka-san,

Thanks for letting me stay over.

Sorry for leaving early.

I have something important I need to finish before things get worse again.

Please focus on your debut with everyone.

And… don't worry too much about me.

—Yuu

He stared at the final line for a second.

"…She's definitely going to worry anyway."

Still, he folded the note neatly and placed it carefully on the table where she'd easily notice it.

Then Yuu quietly slipped his shoes back on near the entrance.

For a brief moment, his hand rested against the doorknob without moving.

Yuu lowered his gaze slightly.

"…Alright."

And gently—

He opened the door.

With that mindset, He starts planning for his move.

The house had become quiet again.

Too quiet.

Haruka stepped out from the kitchen carrying two freshly prepared plates, the faint aroma of breakfast still lingering warmly in the air. Morning sunlight streamed softly through the curtains now, painting pale gold across the dining table and floorboards alike.

"…Yuu?" she called gently.

No response.

She blinked once.

Then noticed it immediately.

The living room couch was empty.

The blanket she had left folded nearby remained untouched, and the faint warmth that had occupied the space only moments ago had already faded.

Haruka slowly set the plates down.

"…He left."

The realization came with surprising certainty.

Haruka walked over quietly and picked it up.

The moment she recognized the handwriting, the corners of her lips curved faintly upward despite herself.

"…You really did leave a note."

Carefully, she unfolded it.

As her eyes moved across the words, the soft morning atmosphere around her seemed to still even further.

Haruka's fingers tightened slightly against the edge of the paper.

Of course he did.

Even after everything—

he still chose to walk toward danger first.

Her eyes lowered to the final lines.

Please focus on your debut with everyone.

And… don't worry too much about me.

Haruka stared silently for several seconds.

Then—

"…That's impossible," she whispered.

A faint smile appeared on her face, but it carried unmistakable concern beneath it.

Because now she remembered him properly.

And remembering Yuu Hazuki meant understanding one very dangerous truth:

He would absolutely throw himself into harm's way if it meant protecting everyone else.

Haruka folded the note carefully against her chest for a brief moment before exhaling softly.

"…You really are unfair sometimes, Yuu."

The morning sunlight continued pouring quietly into the room.

Haruka lowered the note slowly.

"…If Minori has her memories back…" she murmured to herself.

The thought lingered.

Minori remembered.

Yuu trusted her enough to reveal the truth.

Which meant—

Haruka wasn't alone in this confusion anymore.

Her gaze drifted toward the window, where the city beyond continued moving beneath the bright morning sky.

"…Then," she whispered softly, determination gradually returning to her expression, "I'll talk to her."

Not as the uncertain Haruka who ran away from the stage.

Not as someone trapped by fear.

But as someone finally moving forward again.

A faint smile touched her lips.

"…And then," she continued quietly, "I'll properly join MORE MORE JUMP."

Saying the words aloud made something warm bloom inside her chest.

"…You told me not to worry," she said softly.

Then her expression sharpened slightly with quiet resolve.

"But you never said I couldn't help."

With her decision made, Haruka wasted no time.

She carefully slipped Yuu's note into her pocket before walking toward the living room table.

For a moment, she simply stared at the screen.

Then—

A small smile appeared.

Because, unlike before, she didn't need to search through old contacts or second-guess herself.

She remembered everything.

Haruka tapped the contact list.

Her finger hovered briefly over the familiar name.

Minori Hanasato.

Then she pressed call.

The ringtone echoed softly through the room.

Once.

Twice.

Three times.

And then—

A click.

Followed immediately by a burst of energy.

"H-Hello?!"

Haruka instinctively pulled the phone slightly away from her ear.

"Good morning, Minori."

There was a sudden pause.

Then—

"HA-HARUKA-CHAN?!"

The volume somehow doubled.

Haruka winced.

"Yes, it's me."

"W-W-WAIT! HARUKA-CHAN IS CALLING ME! WHY IS HARUKA-CHAN CALLING ME?!"

The sound of hurried footsteps echoed through the phone.

Something fell over.

A door slammed somewhere in the background.

"MINORI! WHAT ARE YOU DOING THIS EARLY?!" Airi's distant voice shouted through the speaker.

"...Should I call back later?"

"NO!"

The answer came so quickly that Haruka nearly laughed.

A few seconds later, Minori's breathing finally settled enough to resemble normal conversation.

"S-Sorry..." Minori said sheepishly. "I got excited."

"I noticed."

Minori laughed awkwardly.

Then her voice softened.

"...How are you, Haruka-chan?"

"...I'm better."

A small silence followed.

Then—

"Minori."

"Yes?"

"I'd like to meet you."

The excitement on the other end instantly returned.

"Really?!"

"Really."

“Th-that must mean that Yuu succeeded!”

Minori sounded genuinely relieved.

As though she had been anxiously waiting for this exact outcome.

Haruka paused.

A faint smile tugged at the corners of her lips.

“…So you were waiting for me.”

“E-Ehehe…”

Even through the phone, Haruka could practically picture Minori scratching her cheek awkwardly.

“I was about to tell you what happened but...”

“You just did.”

“Ah.”

A brief silence.

Then—

“...I’m happy that you’re back, Haruka-chan!”

Haruka laughed softly. "I'm back... and thank you Minori."

A genuine laugh.

“H-Haruka-chan thanked me! Ahh! By the way, Should I call Airi-chan and Shizuku-chan too?!”

Haruka paused.

Then smiled.

“…Yes.”

There was no reason to delay anymore.

No reason to hide.

No reason to run.

“I think it's time.”

The response on the other end was immediate.

“Then MORE MORE JUMP is finally getting its fourth member back!”

“…Yeah.”

Her voice was quiet.

But filled with certainty.

“I'm coming back.”

[Changing to Yuu's perspective]

The morning rush had already begun.

Students filled the sidewalks. Traffic lights cycled through their routine. Bicycle bells rang intermittently as commuters hurried toward work and school.

To everyone else, it was just another ordinary morning.

But for Yuu—

the world always felt slightly one step away from breaking.

He stood motionless in front of a sporting goods and outdoor store inside a shopping mall, glass displays reflecting rows of gear behind him.

"…I've never bought a weapon before," he muttered under his breath.

His gaze drifted slowly across the store window.

"…I should've prepared something."

A pause.

Then, quieter—

"…I never even learned how to fight properly."

His reflection stared back at him.

(I'm not confident with myself though)

The expression of someone who had been improvising survival far too often for his own good.

"…Though," he added after a moment, almost resigned, "I only know fighting from anime scenes anyway."

Inside his smartwatch, a faint flicker of light appeared.

Static rippled across the screen before forming a small, unstable hologram.

"Miku," Yuu called quietly.

"What are you doing, Yuu-kun?"

Her voice came through slightly distorted, like a signal struggling to stay intact.

Yuu didn't look away from the store.

"…I'm looking for a weapon for self-defense."

A beat of silence.

Then—

"E-Eh?"

Miku's hologram tilted sharply, as if she had physically leaned forward in shock.

"Are you planning to fight Haruka-chan's stalker?!"

Yuu hesitated.

"…Well," he admitted, "it'll probably come down to that sooner or later. So I'd rather be prepared."

The static around Miku's form intensified for a moment before settling again.

"That's not something you say so casually…"

"I'm not being casual."

A pause.

Then, more quietly—

"…I just don't want to get stabbed again."

Miku went silent.

The hologram flickered once, twice, like she didn't know how to respond.

"…Yuu-kun," she said finally, softer now, "you can't just jump straight to fighting."

He exhaled through his nose.

"I know."

But his eyes remained fixed on the store window.

Unmoving.

"…I'm just trying to make sure I don't lose anyone this time."

For a brief moment, even the noise of the mall seemed to fade around him.

Miku didn't respond immediately.

When she finally did, her voice was quieter than before.

"…Then at least don't do it alone."

Yuu exhaled slowly, his eyes still fixed on the store window filled with survival gear and camping tools he had been half-seriously considering a minute ago.

"…I'm planning on getting the cops involved, obviously."

The words came out a bit flat, like he was stating something he should have said from the start.

Inside his smartwatch, Miku's hologram flickered again—this time more stable, as if relieved by the direction the conversation had taken.

"I think that's a better idea than fighting, Yuu-kun."

Her tone carried a faint, exhausted relief.

Yuu scratched the side of his cheek awkwardly.

"…Yeah. I guess 'anime protagonist solution' isn't exactly a legal strategy."

“That’s not what I meant…”

“I know.”

Yuu stepped out of the mall and into the morning sunlight. The automatic doors slid shut behind him with a soft hiss.

For a few seconds, he simply stood there, thinking.

The city moved around him as usual, but his mind was elsewhere.

Police, Evidence, Witnesses, and Anomalies.

The problem was simple.

No matter how much he knew something was wrong, he couldn't exactly walk into a police station and say:

"Hello. A reality-warping anomaly has replaced Haruka's original retirement reason, and a stalker who shouldn't exist might try to attack her."

That conversation would last approximately five seconds.

"...I need proof."

The words left his mouth before he realized it.

A burst of static crackled from his smartwatch, and Miku reappeared.

"Proof?"

Yuu nodded.

"If the stalker exists, then there has to be a trail."

"Like what?"

"Messages. Posts. Photos. Witnesses."

His eyes narrowed slightly.

"Nobody suddenly becomes obsessed with a famous idol overnight."

The anomaly may have altered events, but it still had to leave traces behind.

Something or Anything.

His phone vibrated.

Yuu blinked.

"Hm?"

He looked down.

A new message had arrived.

From Minori.

MINORI: YUU-KUN! HARUKA-CHAN IS COMING BACK!!!

The next message arrived immediately.

MINORI: AIRI-CHAN FAINTED!!!

A third message followed.

MINORI: SHIZUKU-CHAN IS CRYING!!

And then a fourth.

MINORI: EVERYTHING IS AMAZING!!!

Yuu stared at the screen.

Then he laughed.

Actually laughed.

A real one.

"...Sounds about right."

Miku giggled.

"Looks like your plan worked."

"Half of it."

Yuu slipped his phone back into his pocket.

"The other half is making sure Haruka can stand on stage safely."

His expression became serious again.

The anomaly was still out there.

Just then, a notification appeared at the top of his screen.

Not a message.

Not a call.

An article recommendation.

His eyes narrowed.

The headline read:

Former ASRUN Idol Haruka Kiritani Reportedly Seen Returning to Entertainment Activities

Yuu froze.

"...Already?"

The article had only been published twenty-three minutes ago.

Twenty-three minutes.

Someone had leaked the information almost immediately.

Miku's expression darkened.

"Yuu-kun..."

"I know."

His grip tightened around the phone.

Yuu's eyes remained locked on the article.

Crowds flowed around him, people passing by without a second glance, yet the world seemed to narrow to the screen in his hand.

Twenty-three minutes.

That wasn't normal.

Not even close.

"...It's within the entertainment business."

Yuu lowered the phone slightly, his mind already racing through possibilities.

"The leak."

His voice became quieter.

More focused.

"Haruka only agreed last night."

"There's no way information moves this fast unless someone inside the industry heard something."

Miku floated beside him.

"You mean a manager?"

"Maybe."

Yuu started walking again.

His pace quickened unconsciously.

"An agency employee."

"An entertainment reporter."

"A photographer."

"A producer."

"Someone monitoring former idols."

Each possibility stacked upon the last.

None of them felt impossible.

But something still bothered him.

"...No."

He stopped.

Miku tilted her head.

"No?"

Yuu looked back at the article.

The timestamp.

The wording.

The source.

Something felt wrong.

"...This article wasn't reporting on a confirmed return."

"Huh?"

"It says 'reportedly seen returning to entertainment activities.'"

Yuu narrowed his eyes.

"That's vague. If someone inside the industry leaked it, they'd have actual information."

He tapped the article.

"They'd know about MORE MORE JUMP."

"They'd know about meetings."

"They'd know about agencies."

"But this..."

His gaze hardened.

"This sounds like speculation."

The wind brushed through his hair.

Then suddenly, his eyes widened.

"...Wait."

Miku blinked.

"What?"

Yuu immediately opened the article.

"...That's it."

Miku floated closer.

"What is?"

Yuu zoomed in.

The image quality was terrible.

The angle awkward.

Like someone had snapped it in a hurry.

"...She was being watched."

"...You think that's him?"

"I don't know."

"...I've been looking at this the wrong way."

Miku swallowed.

"What do you mean?"

Yuu looked up toward the sky.

"If the anomaly created a stalker..."

His voice lowered.

"...then the stalker isn't waiting for Haruka to return."

The realization sent a chill down his spine.

"He's already here."

Miku's expression stiffened.

Yuu immediately opened the article again and zoomed into the attached photo. The image quality was terrible—grainy, compressed, and obviously taken from a distance—but that only made it more unsettling.

Whoever had taken it hadn't wanted to be seen.

His eyes narrowed.

"Think about it. Haruka only agreed to come back last night. This article doesn't know she's rejoining MORE MORE JUMP. It doesn't know about the meeting. It doesn't know about the debut."

Miku floated closer to the screen.

"Then what does it know?"

"It knows where Haruka is."

The answer came immediately.

Yuu lowered the phone and looked up at the morning sky. White clouds drifted lazily overhead, completely indifferent to the unease crawling through his chest.

"This isn't a leak."

The more he thought about it, the more certain he became.

"This is surveillance."

A photographer wouldn't bother publishing a blurry image like this unless they were desperate for a scoop. But the article itself wasn't reporting anything substantial. It was speculation built around a single photograph.

Someone had seen Haruka.

Someone had followed her.

Someone had immediately informed the entertainment media.

And that someone was likely still watching.

Miku remained silent.

For once, neither of them had a joke to make.

The bustling crowd continued around them, yet Yuu suddenly felt as though he were standing in the center of a giant board game, finally seeing where all the pieces had been moving.

The anomaly wasn't targeting Haruka because she was weak.

It was targeting her because she was important.

Because she was the fourth member.

Because her return would draw attention.

Because a tragedy during her comeback would leave a scar on countless people at once.

His grip tightened around the phone.

"Then the final showdown is going to be the debut."

Miku looked up.

"The debut?"

Yuu nodded.

"The moment Haruka steps onto that stage as the fourth member of MORE MORE JUMP."

The image of the future flashed through his mind.

Crowds.

Fans.

Spotlights.

Music.

The culmination of everything Minori, Airi, Shizuku, and Haruka had worked toward.

A perfect stage.

A perfect audience.

A perfect place for an anomaly to strike.

"...That's what it wants."

For several seconds, only the distant sounds of traffic filled the silence between them.

Then Miku spoke quietly.

"What are you going to do?"

Yuu looked at the article one final time before locking his phone.

His expression hardened.

"Simple."

A determined smile appeared on his face.

"Lay a trap and catch."

And somewhere in the city, completely unaware that someone was now hunting him back, the anomaly's pawn continued to watch the stage being prepared for its final act.

[Changing Perspective to Haruka]

Meanwhile—

The entertainment studio was unusually lively.

Staff members hurried through hallways carrying documents and equipment. Conversations overlapped from every direction, creating a constant hum of activity that echoed throughout the building.

Haruka stepped through the entrance and paused.

For a moment, she simply stood there.

The familiar smell of stage equipment.

The distant sound of music from a rehearsal room.

The sight of performers moving between schedules.

It had been a long time since she had willingly returned to a place like this.

Her fingers unconsciously tightened around the strap of her bag.

"...I'm really back."

Not long ago, even walking near an entertainment agency would have made her uneasy.

Yet now she was here.

By choice.

A small smile appeared on her face.

A smile that lasted exactly three seconds.

"Haruka-chan!"

The sudden voice echoed through the lobby.

Haruka barely had time to react before a blur of orange hair came rushing toward her.

"Waah—!"

Minori practically launched herself across the room.

Haruka instinctively caught her.

Somehow.

"Minori..."

"Haruka-chan! Haruka-chan! Haruka-chan!"

"...I'm right here."

"You really came!"

"Yes."

"You really came back!"

"Yes."

"You're really joining MORE MORE JUMP?!"

"...Yes."

Minori looked seconds away from crying.

Haruka couldn't help laughing.

A few nearby staff members were already staring.

"Minori," she said gently.

"Y-Yes?"

"Please breathe."

"Right!"

Minori immediately inhaled so sharply that she started coughing.

Haruka sighed.

Some things never changed.

Fortunately.

Another familiar voice soon arrived to save the situation.

"Honestly..."

Airi walked into the lobby with her arms crossed.

"You've been telling me that 'Haruka will join' many times."

"Airi-chan!"

"And you."

Airi stopped in front of Haruka.

For a brief moment, neither of them spoke.

"...You took long enough."

Haruka laughed.

Airi laughed too.

And just like that, the awkwardness vanished.

A moment later, another voice joined them.

"Oh my..."

Shizuku approached with her usual graceful smile.

Though the slight redness around her eyes suggested she had been emotional only minutes earlier.

"Welcome back, Haruka."

This time—

Haruka's smile softened.

A genuine one.

Not the smile of an idol.

Not the smile she wore for fans.

Just Haruka.

"...I'm home."

For a moment, nobody spoke.

Then Minori immediately started crying.

"A-Ah! Minori!"

"She's crying again," Airi groaned.

"That's because this is emotional!"

Haruka found herself laughing as the familiar chaos unfolded around her.

Because this time, they had chosen it themselves.

Yet as the laughter continued, Haruka couldn't help glancing toward her phone.

Toward the last message she had received.

Toward the person who had made this reunion possible.

"...Yuu."

"Now then, Haruka!"

Airi suddenly pointed a finger directly at her.

The atmosphere shifted instantly.

Minori flinched.

Shizuku blinked.

Haruka, meanwhile, looked completely unfazed.

"I hope you didn't skip your daily jogging, Because we're starting practice right now!"

Minori's eyes widened.

"R-Right now?!"

"Of course right now!" Airi shot back. "Did you think we brought Haruka here for a tea party?"

"W-Well, no, but—"

"No buts!"

Minori immediately straightened.

"Y-Yes, ma'am!"

Airi nodded in satisfaction before turning back toward Haruka.

"Well?"

There was a challenge in her eyes.

"Of course."

The answer came without hesitation.

"I won't hold back anymore."

Silence followed.

Then—

Airi grinned.

The kind of grin that appeared whenever she found exactly the answer she wanted.

"Good."

Minori looked between them nervously.

Shizuku giggled softly beside them.

The sound eased some of the tension filling the room.

Haruka shrugged her shoulders slightly.

"Let's begin."

Almost immediately, Minori let out a tiny squeak.

Because the moment Haruka Kiritani became serious, everyone else had to become serious too.

And thus, the rebirth of MORE MORE JUMP officially began.

Days turned into weeks.

What had begun as a small announcement quickly became one of the most talked-about topics in the idol industry.

Haruka Kiritani Returns.

The headlines spread faster than anyone expected.

Former fans of ASRUN celebrated her comeback. New fans discovered her through MORE MORE JUMP. Social media buzzed with speculation, excitement, and anticipation for the group's first live performance as a complete four-member unit.

And through it all—

Haruka gradually began to change.

The hesitation that once lingered behind her smiles disappeared little by little.

The fear that had followed her since leaving ASRUN no longer surfaced whenever she stood beneath stage lights.

Instead, confidence returned.

Not the confidence of an idol trying to meet expectations.

But the confidence of someone who had finally chosen her own path.

The practice room mirrored that change.

Every dance move became sharper.

Every performance more natural.

Every smile more genuine.

It was as if the Haruka who had once captivated countless fans was slowly returning.

No.

She wasn't returning.

She was becoming someone even stronger.

"Haruka-chan!"

Minori's voice echoed through the practice room as she rushed inside, nearly tripping over her own feet in the process.

"Tomorrow's your first debut!"

Haruka lowered the water bottle she had been drinking from.

"Soon? That's fast..."

Minori stared at her.

"Fast?!"

"Well..."

Haruka smiled sheepishly.

"It feels like I only came back yesterday."

"That's because you've been practicing every day!" Minori exclaimed. "Normal people would've collapsed by now!"

"Haruka-chan doesn't count as a normal person," Airi said from across the room.

"I heard that."

"It was meant to be heard."

Shizuku giggled softly from nearby.

The familiar exchange filled the room with comfortable warmth.

For a brief moment, it felt like nothing could go wrong.

Then Haruka's gaze drifted toward the window.

The setting sun painted the city in shades of gold and orange.

Tomorrow.

The debut.

Her smile faded slightly.

"...Yuu."

The name escaped quietly.

Minori tilted her head.

"Hm?"

Haruka blinked before shaking her head.

"It's nothing."

But it wasn't nothing.

Because throughout the past few weeks, she hadn't seen him once.

And then—

the day arrived.

The morning sky stretched clear and bright above the city, almost deceptively peaceful.

For countless fans, it was simply another exciting day.

For the entertainment industry, it was the comeback everyone had been talking about for weeks.

For MORE MORE JUMP—

it was the beginning of a new chapter.

The venue had been bustling since sunrise. Staff hurried through hallways carrying equipment and documents. Technicians checked lighting rigs one final time. Performers moved between dressing rooms and backstage areas while managers coordinated schedules down to the minute.

Excitement filled every corner of the building.

Today, MORE MORE JUMP would finally stand together as four.

Inside one of the dressing rooms, Minori sat nervously in front of a mirror.

Then immediately stood up.

Then sat down again.

Then stood up.

Then sat down.

Airi finally sighed.

"Minori."

"Y-Yes?!"

"Please stop vibrating."

"I'm not vibrating!"

"You absolutely are."

Minori looked down.

Her leg was shaking.

"...Oh."

Across the room, Shizuku giggled softly while fixing the ribbon in her hair.

"It's understandable. Today is important."

"Important?" Minori squeaked. "This is the biggest day of our lives!"

"Try not to put too much pressure on yourself," Shizuku said gently.

"Too late!"

Airi rubbed her forehead.

Meanwhile, seated quietly near the makeup table, Haruka looked at her reflection in the mirror.

The idol costume.

The familiar stage makeup.

The lights overhead.

Everything felt strangely nostalgic.

Yet unlike before—

her chest wasn't heavy.

She wasn't afraid.

She wasn't running.

She wasn't looking backward.

A soft smile formed on her face.

"I'm really here."

The words barely escaped above a whisper.

Then—

knock.

Knock.

A staff member opened the dressing room door.

"We'll be starting preparations in thirty minutes."

The room immediately straightened.

The atmosphere shifted.

This was it.

The final countdown.

After the staff member left, silence settled over the room for several moments.

Not an uncomfortable silence.

A meaningful one.

Four girls standing at the threshold of a dream.

Haruka slowly rose from her chair.

The others instinctively looked toward her.

For a brief moment, she didn't know what to say.

Then she smiled.

The same smile that had once inspired countless people.

"Let's do our best."

Simple words.

Yet they carried years of emotions behind them.

Minori's eyes immediately lit up.

"Yeah!"

Shizuku nodded warmly.

"Of course."

Airi crossed her arms before smirking.

"Naturally."

The four of them placed their hands together.

Not because anyone instructed them to.

Not because it was rehearsed.

Because it felt right.

"MORE MORE JUMP!"

Their voices overlapped.

[Changing Perspective to Yuu]

Weeks of preparation had led to this moment.

His smartwatch flickered softly.

Miku appeared briefly beside him.

"Nervous?"

Yuu stared at the venue.

At the stage hidden somewhere within.

At the dream Haruka and the others were about to step onto.

"...Yeah."

(I should go to the backstage. Just in case.)

Yuu adjusted the cap on his head and began making his way toward the venue entrance.

The closer he got, the more crowded the area became.

Fans carrying glowsticks and merchandise filled the front plaza. Staff members moved in and out of side entrances while security guards monitored the flow of people entering the building.

Everything appeared normal.

Almost too normal.

Yuu's eyes scanned the crowd one last time before approaching one of the staff-only checkpoints.

A security guard immediately stepped forward.

"Sir, you can't be allowed in here. This area is staff only."

Yuu paused.

(Guess that's fair.)

His hand slipped into his pocket.

(I can just show my old ID.)

Carefully, he pulled out a worn identification card.

The assistant manager ID.

The guard accepted it and examined the card.

"Hazuki... Yuu..."

The man glanced between the photograph and Yuu's face.

A few seconds passed.

Then his posture relaxed.

"I see. This is my first time meeting you, so I wasn't sure. Sorry about that."

Yuu offered a small smile.

"No worries."

Taking the card back, he gave a slight bow.

"Thank you for your service."

The guard nodded before stepping aside.

"Please proceed."

Yuu entered the venue.

The debut was less than an hour away.

Yuu quietly blended into the flow of personnel.

The less attention he drew, the better.

As he walked deeper into the backstage area, his smartwatch flickered.

Miku appeared beside him in miniature form.

"So far, so good."

"Don't jinx it."

"Ehh? I'm just being optimistic!"

"That's exactly how people get jinxed."

Miku puffed her cheeks.

"Mean."

Despite the exchange, Yuu's eyes never stopped moving.

Just then—

His steps halted.

Something felt wrong.

Not dangerous.

Familiar.

Slowly, Yuu turned his head.

At the end of the hallway, partially hidden around a corner, stood a figure wearing a black cap.

"Miku."

The hologram immediately straightened.

"...Yeah."

Without taking his eyes off the corner where the figure had disappeared, Yuu adjusted his cap.

"I think we found our stalker!"

And before the debut had even begun, the hunt was already underway.

He sprinted.

His shoes pounded against the polished floor as he raced through the backstage hallways, weaving between startled staff members carrying equipment and documents.

"Eh?!"

"Watch out!"

"Hey!"

He ignored the shouts behind him.

The debut was less than an hour away.

If this really was the stalker, he couldn't let them disappear.

Yuu rounded the corner.

The figure was still there.

Black cap.

Dark jacket.

Moving quickly through the corridor.

As though they knew exactly where they were going.

As though they wanted him to follow.

Yuu narrowed his eyes.

(There!)

The distance between them shrank.

or a brief moment, Yuu caught sight of their face beneath the cap.

And immediately recognized them.

His expression hardened.

"You."

The stalker.

A young man.

The same person who had been lurking around Haruka.

The same person responsible for the threats.

The same person who had stabbed him.

The young man's eyes widened slightly upon realizing Yuu had recognized him.

Then he turned and bolted.

"!"

Yuu accelerated instantly.

The chase exploded into motion.

The stalker darted into a narrow service corridor.

Yuu followed without hesitation.

The sounds of the venue faded behind them.

The hallway grew quieter.

Rows of storage cases lined the walls.

Emergency lights cast long shadows across the floor.

The stalker shoved aside a cart to block the path.

Yuu vaulted over it.

They pushed through a side door.

The stalker glanced back again as panic had finally appeared on his face.

He lunged.

His hand shot forward and grabbed the back of the stalker's jacket.

The stalker stumbled.

"Let go!"

He twisted violently, trying to break free.

Yuu refused.

The two crashed into the wall.

The stalker struggled desperately.

Yuu pinned him there.

"Enough!"

The stalker's breathing became ragged.

For a brief moment, Yuu thought he had won.

Then—

The man's arm suddenly moved.

A flash of metal.

Yuu's eyes widened.

Too late.

Something slammed into his abdomen.

A blunt impact followed by warmth.

His grip loosened instinctively.

The stalker staggered backward.

Yuu looked down.

Red slowly spread across his shirt.

"...Ah."

The pain didn't arrive immediately.

(Not again.)

But Yuu had expected that possibility.

His trembling hand dove into his jacket pocket.

The small device he'd bought days ago for his preparation.

For this exact moment.

The stalker had only taken three steps when—

Crack!

The taser connected against the side of his neck.

The man's body seized instantly.

A strangled cry escaped him.

Then his legs gave out beneath him.

He collapsed onto the floor.

Motionless.

Silence returned to the corridor.

Yuu remained standing.

Barely.

His breathing had become uneven.

His vision blurred around the edges.

The taser slipped from his fingers and clattered against the floor.

"...Got you... You psycho.."

Just then—

music erupted from somewhere beyond the walls.

The debut had started.

Even through layers of concrete and steel, Yuu could hear it.

The cheers.

The applause.

The roar of hundreds of fans.

And above it all—

the voices of four idols singing together on the stage.

MORE MORE JUMP.

A weak laugh escaped him.

"...Looks like they made it."

The stalker lay unconscious against the floor where the taser had dropped him. For the first time in weeks, the threat was no longer moving.

No longer chasing Haruka.

No longer lurking in the shadows.

It was over.

Or at least—

it should have been.

Yuu took a step forward.

Then another.

His hand remained pressed firmly against his abdomen.

The movement made his legs feel strangely heavy.

"Oh god..."

His voice came out shaky.

"I feel like I'm about to pass out."

The corridor swayed slightly.

He immediately grabbed the wall beside him.

No.

Not now.

Not here.

Not after everything.

"Hold it in..."

He forced himself to take another step.

The music from the stage continued.

Bright.

Hopeful.

Victorious.

A stark contrast to the lonely hallway he found himself walking through.

"Don't loop..."

His breathing became uneven.

Every instinct told him to stop moving.

To sit down.

To rest.

But he couldn't.

Not yet.

Because if he looped now—

everything would be reset.

Haruka's memories.

MORE MORE JUMP's reunion.

Minori's determination.

Airi and Shizuku's hard work.

The debut.

All of it.

Gone.

His fingers clenched tighter.

"If I loop now..."

His voice was barely audible.

"...everything would've been for nothing."

"Ignore it..."

His vision blurred.

"Ignore the pain..."

The cheers from the crowd grew louder.

The song reached its chorus.

And somehow—

That sound alone was enough to keep him moving.

(In the end, I hid inside a storage room and passed out.)

(But I didn't loop.)

(The stalker got caught.)

(And now...)

A gentle breeze swept across the endless field.

Yuu slowly opened his eyes.

For a moment, he didn't move.

Above him stretched the familiar sky of his SEKAI, a strange, beautiful expanse woven together by fragments of light and faint traces of static.

Thin cracks of blue-white distortion drifted across the heavens like frozen lightning, illuminating the world below with a cold, dreamlike glow.

The grass beneath him rustled softly.

He remembered forcing himself inside before his legs gave out beneath him.

After that, there was only darkness.

"Looks like you're finally awake."

A cheerful voice reached him.

Yuu turned his head.

Miku stood nearby, smiling brightly.

Not the strained smile she had worn during the anomaly.

Not the flickering, unstable smile hidden beneath layers of glitches.

A genuine smile.

"Thank you, Miku."

The words came naturally.

Miku blinked before breaking into an even wider grin.

"You're welcome!"

(According to her, the moment I lost consciousness, she had immediately pulled me into my SEKAI and treated my injuries.)

MORE MORE JUMP's first performance as four members had gone exactly as it should have.

The audience loved it.

The fans cheered louder than anyone expected.

Haruka stood on that stage.

Just as she was always meant to.

The thought alone eased a weight Yuu hadn't realized he was still carrying.

Yuu pushed himself up from the glitching grass, brushing faint particles of light off his sleeves as they dissolved back into the air.

"Should go pay a visit to Stage SEKAI?"

Miku tilted her head, as if the question was obvious.

"Sure!"

Her voice echoed brighter than before, almost light enough to blend into the sky itself.

Yuu gave a small nod and started walking.

A translucent blue hologram suddenly appeared beside him.

Panels of glowing data unfolded in front of him, floating in the air like sheets of glass. Miku watched curiously as he navigated through several menus.

Yuu tapped a glowing icon.

A circle of light formed beneath his feet.

And in an instant—

he vanished.

The scenery blurred.

Then reformed.

Yuu made his way toward the stage within Stage SEKAI.

As he approached, he noticed movement beneath the lights.

Miku and Rin of Stage SEKAI were already there, guiding a practice session with MORE MORE JUMP.

Minori was enthusiastically following along.

Haruka moved through the choreography with practiced precision.

Airi adjusted her stance after Rin pointed something out.

Shizuku smiled as Miku demonstrated the next movement.

It looked less like a concert and more like a friendly rehearsal.

Then, they noticed him.

Minori immediately brightened.

"Yuu!"

Haruka smiled.

"You came."

Yuu raised a hand. "Looks like practice is going well."

"It is!"

Airi turned toward him.

"Oh, Yuu."

Shizuku smiled warmly.

"Ah, it's you again."

Yuu blinked.

"...You two aren't surprised?"

Airi raised an eyebrow.

"Why would we be? We already know you."

Shizuku nodded.

"Haruka-chan and Minori-chan introduced us before."

Yuu paused.

"...Right."

Then Airi looked around him.

"Although..."

Her gaze shifted toward the stage, then back to him.

"How exactly are you here?"

Shizuku tilted her head.

"That's true."

"I thought only members connected to this SEKAI could enter."

Minori froze.

Haruka looked away slightly.

The two clearly realized they had forgotten to explain that part.

Airi crossed her arms.

"Wait."

Her eyes narrowed.

"Don't tell me there's another ridiculous explanation."

Yuu scratched the back of his head.

"...There is."

Several minutes later—

After explanations involving anomalies, loops, alternate timelines, and Yuu's unusual ability to travel between SEKAI—

Airi stared at him.

Then at Minori.

Then at Haruka.

Then back at him.

"...That's insane."

"Yeah."

Shizuku placed a hand against her cheek.

"So that's why you were able to help us from behind the scenes."

"Pretty much."

Airi sighed.

"I thought finding out about SEKAI was complicated enough."

Minori laughed nervously.

"Sorry."

Haruka nodded.

"It took me a while to process too."

Rin looked impressed.

"Wow."

Miku giggled.

"I told you he was interesting."

"That's one way to put it," Airi muttered.

Despite her words, a small smile appeared on her face.

"...Still."

She looked at Yuu.

"Thanks."

Yuu blinked.

"Huh?"

Airi immediately looked away.

"Don't make me repeat it."

Shizuku smiled warmly.

"Thank you, Yuu."

Minori immediately joined in.

"Thank you for helping us!"

Haruka stepped forward last.

Her expression was calm.

Sincere.

"Thank you."

"For protecting our future."

Yuu froze for a moment.

Then smiled.

"...You're welcome."

The atmosphere became quiet.

Comfortable.

The debut had succeeded.

The anomaly was gone.

Everything had finally reached the ending it was supposed to.

His smile softened.

"...I guess it's time."

Minori tilted her head.

"Time?"

Yuu didn't answer immediately.

Instead, he stepped closer.

A faint blue glow appeared around his hand.

The others watched curiously.

This time, the light didn’t form fragments that drifted outward.

Instead, it unraveled into thin, delicate threads—like strands of memory being carefully pulled apart from reality itself.

Not their entire past.

Only the parts that should not have existed.

The moments where Yuu had been involved.

The encounters that never should have happened.

The connections that had been forced into place by interference.

One by one, those threads of memory were gently drawn out.

Minori’s.

Airi’s.

Shizuku’s.

Haruka’s.

Soft, quiet, almost painless.

Like forgetting a dream upon waking.

The threads of light gathered in Yuu’s hand and dissolved into nothing.

When it ended, the girls stood as they were before.

Unchanged.

Unburdened.

Only now, there was no trace of him left in their memories at all.

Yuu lowered his hand.

"...There."

The moment slipped away like water through fingers.

A strange heaviness pressed into the air, like reality itself had noticed something was ending.

Minori swayed first.

"...Huh?"

Her voice came out weaker than before.

Airi’s eyes widened slightly.

"Wait—what’s—"

Shizuku brought a hand to her head.

Haruka’s expression changed last.

Not confusion.

Recognition of something wrong.

"...Huh—"

Once.

Twice.

And then, all four of them collapsed at the same time.

Minori fell forward first, her knees giving out as if the strength had simply been erased from her body. Airi tried to step back, but her legs buckled mid-motion. Shizuku’s fall was slow and graceful, like a puppet whose strings had been cut. Haruka reached out instinctively but never finished the motion.

They all began to fall toward the stage floor.

But before any of them could hit, two figures moved instantly.

"Miku!"

"Got it!"

Miku and Rin of Stage SEKAI rushed forward in perfect sync.

Miku caught Minori first, arms wrapping around her before she could fall completely. Rin slid in beside Airi, catching her by the shoulders and steadying her weight. Shizuku was supported gently by Miku’s quick movement, while Rin shifted to catch Haruka just before she hit the ground.

All four idols were held safely in their arms.

Unconscious.

But unharmed.

Miku’s expression tightened as she looked down at them.

"...Their memories were taken all at once."

"Yeah. That’s what it feels like." Rin looked at Yuu with a concerned face.

Yuu stood still at the edge of the portal.

Watching.

He didn’t move to help.

He didn’t step forward.

He simply observed the result of what he had chosen.

Miku glanced up at him, her voice quieter now.

"You didn’t have to do it like this..."

Rin didn’t look at him, but her tone softened slightly.

"...At least say goodbye properly next time."

Yuu’s gaze lingered on the four girls in their arms.

Minori’s peaceful expression.

Airi’s relaxed face.

Shizuku’s calm breathing.

Haruka’s quiet stillness.

Then, slowly, he turned toward the portal.

"...Sorry."

The blue light reflected faintly in his eyes.

And without another word, he stepped forward.

The world of Stage SEKAI faded behind him as the door closed.

The light swallowed him completely.

For a moment, there was nothing.

No sky.

No stage.

No voices.

Only a thin, weightless silence stretching endlessly in every direction.

Then—

Yuu opened his eyes.

The glitching grass returned beneath his feet, faint distortions crawling across the horizon like cracks in glass. The sky above shimmered with broken data fragments, drifting slowly as if the world itself had forgotten how to stabilize completely.

He exhaled.

"...It’s done."

Miku appeared beside him almost immediately.

He lowered his gaze slightly.

"You’re angry."

It wasn’t a question.

Miku closed her eyes for a moment.

"...No."

A pause.

Then she opened them again.

"I’m not angry."

Her voice softened.

"I just think… it hurts a little."

The wind passed through the glitching field, bending the light in unnatural waves.

Yuu didn’t respond immediately.

Instead, he looked at his hand.

The same hand that had pulled threads of memory from people who trusted him.

The same hand that had decided what they were allowed to remember—and what they weren’t.

"...Yeah."

His voice came out quieter than he expected.

"It probably does."

Chapter 80: As the Curtain Rises

Chapter Notes

> Before you read this, I just want to apologize for the last chapter for being so messy! I'm thinking of changing my writing style to something new now and I'm planning on remaking the entire series (I'll finish this book first). With that! WONDERHOY!!

It's been a few days since the completion of MORE MORE JUMP's chapter.

Things had settled down considerably.

The story had returned to its proper flow.

MORE MORE JUMP's debut was a success, and their name was gradually becoming more well-known throughout Shibuya. Posters had begun appearing around the city. Their songs were being shared online. More fans gathered at every performance.

The future that had nearly been lost was now moving forward on its own.

Exactly as it should.

Yuu lay sprawled across his bed, staring at his phone as episode after episode of a drama played on the screen.

One episode became two.

Two became five.

Five somehow became an entire season.

"...Just one more episode."

A familiar lie.

Ten minutes later—

The hologram finally disappeared.

Yuu stretched and glanced at his smartwatch.

His eyes widened.

"Crap."

He immediately jumped to his feet.

"I'm late."

The reason was embarrassingly simple.

He had spent the past few days studying.

Not mathematics.

Not combat.

Acting.

Specifically, how normal people acted.

Which turned out to be much harder than expected.

"Acting can be really hard without the system's help."

Back then, Yuu relied heavily on his powers—the Project SEKAI interface—to navigate everyday interactions. It could assist him with facial expressions, timing, and social cues whenever he chose to use it. The functions were still there, but after everything that had happened, he was trying not to depend on them for every little interaction. It turned out figuring things out on his own was much harder than he expected.

Now he had to figure everything out himself.

The smartwatch flickered.

A small hologram of Miku appeared atop the screen, balancing herself on the edge as if it were a stage.

"It's Wonderland x Showtime's turn?"

"That's right."

Yuu opened his holographic interface and pulled up the current story progression.

One of his opportunities to interact with the characters in WxS.

Phoenix Wonderland Audition Event.

"There should be an audition at Phoenix Wonderland."

Miku nodded.

"Which means the story's about to start moving."

Yuu closed the windows one by one.

His expression became slightly more serious.

The next chapter.

Wonderland x Showtime.

Compared to MORE MORE JUMP's story, this one was different.

Much noisier.

Much more chaotic.

And significantly more unpredictable.

And a theme park is slowly losing its audience.

Even without anomalies, it was already complicated.

"At least this one shouldn't involve stalkers."

Miku blinked.

"...You just jinxed it."

"I didn't."

"You absolutely did."

Yuu ignored her.

Destination: Phoenix Wonderland.

The largest theme park in Shibuya.

Home of dreams and home of performances.

If he remembered correctly—The place where a certain loud senpai would soon begin dragging people into his impossible ambitions.

Yuu sighed.

"...I should probably get moving."

Miku smiled.

"Ready?"

Then he remembered exactly who was involved in this chapter.

Tsukasa Tenma, Rui Kamishiro, Nene Kusanagi, and eventually Emu Otori.

A headache immediately began forming.

"...No."

Miku giggled.

"Too bad."

Yuu let out a long sigh before straightening his posture.

"Right. Acting."

He quickly adjusted his expression in the reflection of a nearby window, trying to look like a normal high school student instead of someone secretly monitoring the flow of an entire story.

"...Still feels weird."

"You're overthinking it again."

"I know."

Miku shook her head with an amused smile.

Yuu grabbed his bag from beside the door and slung it over his shoulder.

"Let's go."

With that, he left his room and headed downstairs.

A few moments later, he stepped out of his house and into the morning streets of Shibuya.

The city was already alive with activity. People hurried along the sidewalks, conversations drifted through the air, and distant advertisements flashed across towering screens.

Yuu took a deep breath.

Then he started walking toward Phoenix Wonderland.

And somewhere ahead—

The gears of the next story had already begun turning.

[Changing Point of View.]

Meanwhile—

At Phoenix Wonderland.

The theme park was bustling despite it being a normal weekday.

Families filled the walkways. Children's laughter echoed from every direction. The distant sounds of attractions blended together with cheerful music, creating the lively atmosphere the park was known for.

Standing near the entrance, one boy watched the crowd with his arms crossed.

A confident grin spread across his face.

"Excellent."

He nodded to himself.

"Even on an ordinary weekday, Phoenix Wonderland attracts countless visitors."

His smile widened.

"Which makes it the perfect place for my debut as a star!"

In his mind, the future was already clear.

He would pass the audition effortlessly.

His performances would receive overwhelming praise.

Crowds would gather for every show.

Fans would chant his name.

And before long, his legend would begin.

"Hehehe..."

The grin became larger.

"Hahahaha!"

Nearby pedestrians glanced at him before quickly continuing on their way.

"Perfection!"

"Excuse me."

He immediately turned.

A staff member stood nearby.

"Are you here for the job interview?"

"Indeed!"

"Then you're in the wrong place."

He froze.

"...What?"

"The interviews are being held in another building."

The staff member pointed across the park.

"You'll have to go around that way. It's a bit of a walk."

A terrible silence followed.

He stared.

The building.

Then the staff member.

Then the building again.

His face paled.

"This can't be happening!"

Without another word, he bolted.

"I'll be late!"

The staff member watched him disappear.

"...What's up with that kid?"

Several minutes later—

Tsukasa burst through the doors of the audition building.

"Huff... Huff..."

His chest rose and fell rapidly.

"I made it..."

He pressed a hand dramatically against his forehead.

"My legend nearly ended before it even had a chance to begin!"

Fortunately, the interviews had not yet started.

Several applicants sat waiting as staff members organized documents at the front of the room.

An interviewer stepped forward.

"We will now begin interviewing the next group of applicants."

Tsukasa immediately straightened.

"Coming!"

A confident smile returned to his face.

(Now then...)

His eyes sparkled.

(First impressions are everything!)

Applicants introduced themselves one by one.

The interviewer nodded politely as each person spoke.

Then—

"Next, please."

Tsukasa rose from his seat.

This was his moment.

"My first name is written with the character for ruling, and my second with the character for pegasus!"

Several heads turned.

"I am Tsukasa Tenma! The soaring pegasus born to rule the world of entertainment!"

The room fell silent.

A chair tipped over somewhere in the back.

Tsukasa spread his arms dramatically.

"Allow me to take my first step toward stardom upon one of your stages, and I shall repay you with performances so magnificent that audiences will remember them for years to come!"

The interviewer blinked.

Once.

Twice.

Before he could respond, another voice suddenly echoed through the room.

"Sorry! I'm late!"

The doors flew open.

Everyone turned.

A boy stood in the doorway, slightly out of breath, his school bag hanging from one shoulder.

He glanced around the room.

Then his eyes landed directly on me.

For a moment, he simply stared.

What was that look?

Admiration?

Awe?

Recognition of greatness?

Naturally, it had to be one of those.

I stared back confidently.

The two of us locked eyes.

Then, for some reason, the latecomer suddenly raised an arm as though drawing an invisible sword.

"My name is Hazuki Yuu."

A brief pause followed.

Then he declared,

"A knight answering the call of destiny."

Silence filled the room.

Tsukasa blinked.

The interviewer blinked.

Several applicants blinked.

The boy himself seemed to freeze in place immediately afterward.

However—A knight answering the call of destiny?

Tsukasa's eyes widened.

(What an introduction!)

The interviewer slowly lowered his clipboard.

Today was already becoming far more complicated than expected.

"Er... Thank you, both of you..."

The interviewer pinched the bridge of his nose.

"Next, please."

The interview continued.

Though the atmosphere never fully recovered.

Several applicants still glanced toward Tsukasa and Yuu as if wondering whether they had accidentally wandered into a stage play.

Meanwhile—

Elsewhere in Phoenix Wonderland.

A pair of eyes watched everything unfold through a slightly opened door.

"Hehehe☆"

A cheerful giggle escaped.

"Perfect!"

The mysterious observer clasped their hands together.

"Two of them fit perfectly!"

Their smile widened.

"I'm looking forward to it!"

A finger pointed dramatically toward the audition room.

"Yuu-kun! Tsukasa-kun!"

Eventually, the interviews concluded...

[Changing Point of View back to Yuu.]

Applicants began leaving the room one by one.

Tsukasa emerged from the building looking more energized than when he entered.

Naturally.

A future world star could not be exhausted by something as mundane as an interview.

A few steps ahead, he spotted the latecomer from earlier.

Hazuki Yuu.

The self-proclaimed knight.

Tsukasa immediately strode toward him.

"Hey!"

Yuu looked up.

"Hm?"

"You're good!"

"...Good at what?"

"Introductions, of course!"

Tsukasa pointed dramatically.

"That entrance was magnificent!"

Yuu blinked.

"...You think so?"

"Naturally!"

Tsukasa crossed his arms proudly.

"A knight answering the call of destiny! Such conviction! Such theatrical presence!"

Yuu immediately looked away.

(Please stop reminding me.)

"I was late to the interview," Yuu muttered. "So I figured I'd leave an impression."

"A splendid strategy!"

Tsukasa nodded repeatedly.

"First impressions are vital! A future star must seize every opportunity to stand out!"

"Future star..."

"Indeed!"

Tsukasa suddenly straightened.

As if remembering something important.

"By the way!"

He extended a hand.

"My name is Tsukasa Tenma!"

Yuu stared.

"...I know."

"Hm?"

"You introduced yourself to the entire building."

"...Ah."

A pause.

Then Tsukasa nodded.

"Excellent! Then my efforts were not wasted!"

Yuu couldn't help laughing.

Just a little.

Tsukasa pointed dramatically toward the sky.

"I shall become a world-famous star!"

Several nearby visitors turned to look.

Again.

"And once I do, my performances will inspire smiles across the globe!"

The declaration was loud.

Ridiculously loud.

Yet—there wasn't a shred of arrogance behind it.

Only sincerity and belief.

Yuu recognized that immediately.

(Tsukasa Tenma... The future leader of Wonderland x Showtime. And somehow he's exactly as loud as I imagined... Haahh.)

Before Yuu could respond, A sudden voice echoed from behind them.

"Excuse me!"

Both boys turned.

A staff member was jogging toward them.

"Hazuki Yuu and Tsukasa Tenma?"

The two exchanged a glance.

Then pointed at themselves simultaneously.

"That's me."

"Indeed, that is I!"

The staff member smiled.

"Congratulations."

Both boys blinked.

"You've passed the first screening."

A grin immediately exploded across Tsukasa's face.

"Hahahaha!"

He threw both arms toward the sky.

“AS EXPECTED! Should we celebrate, Hazuki-kun?!”

Tsukasa turned with sparkling eyes, still riding the high of his success.

“Eh? I’ll pass,” Yuu replied calmly. “I need to go home and prepare.”

“…Is that so?”

Tsukasa blinked once, then immediately recovered.

“Fine then! I shall celebrate on your behalf as well!”

Without waiting for agreement, he struck a dramatic pose.

“Today marks the beginning of Tsukasa Tenma’s rise as a future superstar!”

Nearby visitors gave him a wide berth.

Yuu quietly stepped aside.

“…Yeah.”

A day later—

Miyamasuzaka Middle School.

[Tsukasa Tenma’s Perspective]

Tsukasa walked through the school gates with absolute confidence, hands on his hips, chin raised slightly toward the sky.

“Naturally, I passed the interview!”

His voice echoed down the hallway.

“Success is the only possible outcome for the future star that I am!”

A passing student glanced at him.

“…Who’s that talking to?”

Tsukasa continued without hesitation.

“Next, I will be selected for a major role in a grand performance! Tickets will sell out the moment my name is announced! My fame will snowball into an avalanche of offers from prestigious theaters across the country! And one day—no—very soon—I will stand upon the grandest stage in the world!”

He laughed loudly.

“Ha ha ha ha!”

A girl walking nearby whispered to herself.

(…Spring really does bring out weird people. I should hurry home…)

Meanwhile—

A second voice came from the side.

“Oh ho?”

A man paused mid-step, watching Tsukasa with mild interest.

“That’s quite the enthusiastic young man. He went toward Phoenix Wonderland earlier… perhaps I should check it out as well.”

Tsukasa arrived at Phoenix Wonderland and made his way to the main gate. Standing proudly with his arms crossed, he surveyed the area with confidence.

“New hires were told to wait by the main gate... so this should be the place.”

As he looked around, he spotted a familiar figure nearby and immediately brightened.

“Oh? If it isn't Hazuki-kun!”

Yuu turned toward him. “Good morning, Tenma.”

“As I said before—Tsukasa is fine!”

“Alright... Tsukasa.”

Before either of them could continue the conversation, something suddenly poked Tsukasa from behind.

“W-Whoa?! What do you want?!” he exclaimed, spinning around.

Standing there was a large mascot character. The mascot bowed politely.

“My apologies for startling you. I am an employee of the park.”

The voice that emerged from the costume was unexpectedly deep.

Very deep.

Tsukasa stiffened.

(...That voice really doesn't match the mascot image at all...)

The mascot tilted its head slightly.

“Am I correct in assuming you are Tsukasa Tenma?”

“Yes! That's me!”

“And you are Hazuki Yuu?”

Yuu nodded. “Yes.”

The mascot stared at them for a brief moment before speaking again.

“Please follow me. I will guide you to your assigned stage.”

Tsukasa immediately straightened up.

“Understood!”

The two followed after the mascot. As they walked, Tsukasa couldn't help but admire the scenery around him.

So this is Phoenix Wonderland's backstage area...!

His eyes sparkled with excitement.

That must be one of the newer attractions over there... and that one too! Everything looks so well maintained!

The further they walked, the more eager he became.

“I can't wait to see my stage!”

However, after several minutes, the surroundings began to change.

The paved roads gradually gave way to rougher paths.

The lively atmosphere of the park faded.

The vegetation grew thicker.

Eventually, Tsukasa slowed his pace.

“...Um. Are you sure this is the right way?”

“We are almost there,” the mascot replied without stopping.

Tsukasa glanced at Yuu and lowered his voice.

“...Are we really on the right track?”

Yuu shrugged.

“Who knows?”

“Huh?! Don't be so calm about it!”

The path narrowed even further. Branches brushed against their shoulders as they pushed through the overgrown greenery.

“...This is starting to look like a jungle.”

Then, suddenly, the trees parted.

A clearing opened before them.

And in the center stood a stage.

Tsukasa came to a halt.

“...A stage?”

He stepped closer and examined it.

The structure looked old and worn.

Paint peeled from the walls.

The wooden boards creaked ominously.

A weathered sign hung crookedly nearby.

Wonder Stage.

Tsukasa stared at it.

“...This stage is in serious need of repairs...”

Before he could say anything else—

“HAAAAAAAAAAH!!”

A loud voice rang out from above.

CRASH!

Something plummeted from the sky and landed nearby, kicking up a cloud of dust.

“Whoa!” Tsukasa jumped back. “What on earth was that?! Something just dropped out of the sky!”

“...That startled me too,” Yuu admitted.

As the dust settled, a girl sprang up energetically from the impact site.

“Welcome to the Wonder Stage, a place filled with lots of smiles☆”

She struck a dramatic pose.

“Wonderhoy☆”

Silence followed.

Tsukasa blinked.

“...Huh?”

The girl leaned forward expectantly.

“Wonderhoy!”

Tsukasa stared at her.

“...Can you stop now?”

“Wonder—”

“Stop.”

Beside him, Yuu hesitated before awkwardly responding.

“...Wo-wonderhoy?”

Tsukasa immediately turned toward him.

“Why did you say it with a question mark?!”

The girl looked at Tsukasa with pleading eyes.

"Okay, I'll do it! Wonderhoy, wonderhoy, ahoy! Are you satisfied now? Anyway, who are you anyway? Where did you drop from?"

“Hehe☆”

Then she pointed upward.

“I came from up there!”

Tsukasa slowly followed her finger.

His eyes widened.

“That's like two stories high!”

“Yup!”

Yuu narrowed his eyes slightly.

“...That's not a normal entrance.”

The girl simply grinned.

“Of course it is! I'm Emu Otori!”

She spread her arms dramatically.

“I invited you two here, Tsukasa-kun! Yuu-kun!”

Tsukasa froze.

“...Invited?”

Emu nodded enthusiastically.

“Yes! Let's put on incredible shows together!”

She raised both hands toward the sky.

“Let's fill this place with lots and lots of smiles!”

Somehow, sparklers seemed to appear behind her at the perfect moment.

Tsukasa's brain struggled to process everything that had happened in the last few minutes.

“...W-Whaaaaat?! What the heck is going on?!”

Yuu let out a quiet sigh beside him.

“...That should be my question too.”

And there, deep within the forgotten and overgrown Wonder Stage, an entirely unexpected story was about to begin.

Chapter 81: Wonderhoy!!

Tsukasa stared at Emu in silence.

For a few seconds, he simply stood there, trying to process everything she had just told him. The longer he thought about it, the more confused he became.

Eventually, he raised a hand.

"Okay, so... give me a moment to make sense of everything you just said."

He pointed toward the stage behind her.

The structure looked old. The paint had faded, rust stained parts of the metal framework, and weeds had begun claiming the cracks around it.

"You perform at this stage?"

"Yup☆"

"And I didn't pass the audition, but you invited me and Yuu here as a special favor?"

"Yup yup☆"

A vein twitched on Tsukasa's forehead.

"Meaning..."

Slowly, he turned toward Wonder Stage.

"...I'm going to be working here at this dilapidated stage?!"

"It's not dilapidated!" Emu protested immediately. "It has a stylish color scheme!"

Yuu glanced around the area.

"...I mean, it could use some work."

He shrugged.

"I don't mind acting here."

"Shut up, Yuu."

Tsukasa pointed at him accusingly.

"I feel like we've fallen victim to some elaborate scheme."

His finger swung back toward the stage.

"And you do realize that's not paint, right? It's rust!"

Emu tilted her head.

"Hm?"

Tsukasa let out a groan.

"But why has it been left like this to begin with? Every other attraction in the park has either been renovated or rebuilt. I even heard they were constructing a brand-new stage."

The mascot, who had been quietly listening until now, finally spoke.

"The original plan was to renovate the entire park. Old stages would be demolished and replaced with new facilities."

"Then why isn't this one gone?"

"The project was suspended."

Tsukasa blinked.

"...Why?"

The mascot remained silent for a moment.

Then it continued.

"As for whether this stage is closed..."

"Nope! We're still doing shows!"

Emu jumped into the conversation before it could finish.

She puffed out her chest proudly.

"Today's performance was Fish World Show!"

She struck a dramatic pose.

"I played the sunfish!"

A brief pause followed.

"There was no audience though!"

Yuu looked toward the rows of seats.

They were completely empty.

"It is pretty empty..."

"WHAT'S THE POINT THEN?!"

Tsukasa's shout echoed throughout the area.

Several birds took flight from nearby trees.

Emu, however, remained completely unfazed.

"But now that you two are here, we're going to draw crowds again!"

Her eyes sparkled with excitement.

"I can feel it!"

Tsukasa pinched the bridge of his nose.

"...Listen."

His expression became serious.

"I have ambitions, you know."

"Oh?"

"Oh?"

Emu and Yuu responded at the same time.

Straightening his posture, Tsukasa spoke in a quieter voice.

"When I was little, I was taken to see a musical."

For once, there was no exaggerated gesture.

No dramatic flourish.

Only sincerity.

"The lead actor was incredible."

His gaze drifted somewhere far away.

"I was completely captivated."

A smile appeared on his face.

"My heart was stolen."

The smile widened.

"I had witnessed a true star."

The conviction returned to his voice.

"After that day, my path was decided."

He pointed toward the sky.

"I would become a star myself!"

Then he gestured toward Wonder Stage.

"But to do that, I need a proper debut."

His hand swept toward the empty audience seats.

"I need a major troupe."

Then toward the rows of vacant chairs.

"A large audience."

Finally, he pointed at himself.

"And a stage worthy of Tsukasa Tenma!"

–

"Hey, Yuu! Did you know there's a trap door hidden in the stage? You can spring out of it dramatically!"

"Want to try it?"

"Seriously? I'd love to try. How do I do it?"

Tsukasa spun around instantly.

"WERE YOU TWO EVEN LISTENING?!"

Emu smiled brightly.

"I heard lots about you at the audition!"

"Huh?"

"You promised incredible shows!"

She clasped her hands together.

"That really spoke to me!"

Her eyes shone with excitement.

"I just knew you were exactly the person I needed to help make this stage great again!"

Tsukasa blinked.

Then smiled.

Then smirked.

Then smiled even wider.

"Ah."

He nodded knowingly.

"So that's how it is."

Emu tilted her head.

"How what is?"

"You've been captivated by me since the audition."

"What are you writing?"

Before anyone noticed, Tsukasa had already pulled out a notebook.

"I shall do this for you as a special favor."

With exaggerated elegance, he began writing.

"Tsu..."

Scratch.

"Ka..."

Scratch.

"Sa..."

A final flourish.

"There."

He tore the page free and handed it over.

"My autograph."

Emu accepted it.

"Wow!"

Her face lit up immediately.

"Your writing is so cool!"

She held it up proudly.

"Is this really for me?!"

"Naturally."

Tsukasa folded his arms.

"Keep it safe."

His grin widened.

"One day it will be worth a fortune."

Then he turned dramatically.

"Farewell, my strange fan."

"But you don't even have a single fan."

Tsukasa nearly stumbled.

Slowly, he turned toward Yuu.

"...Yuu."

"Yes?"

"Stop."

"Stop what?"

"Those side comments."

Yuu shrugged.

Ignoring him, Tsukasa pointed toward the exit.

"Let's go."

"To where?"

"We've clearly been scammed."

"Gwah!"

Before he could take another step, his collar suddenly tightened.

Tsukasa stopped.

Slowly, he looked down.

Emu was gripping the back of his collar with surprising strength.

"Don't go!"

"LET GO OF MY COLLAR!"

She pulled harder.

"Let's do shows together!"

"I CAN'T BREATHE!"

"I promise it'll be fun!"

The fabric stretched alarmingly.

Tsukasa wheezed.

"Argh..."

Another tug.

"...I can't..."

Another tug.

"...speak..."

Another tug.

"...Ugh..."

"You promised incredible shows!"

Tsukasa desperately pointed toward the sky.

"If you're that interested in performing, join a theater troupe!"

Another tug.

"Then you can perform on proper stages!"

Another tug.

"Not forsaken ruins like this one!"

"It's not that forsaken."

"YUU."

"Sorry."

"No you're not."

Suddenly, Emu stopped pulling.

Her grip loosened.

The cheerful expression on her face softened.

"No."

Her voice was quiet.

"It has to be here."

Both boys paused.

The smile remained, but there was something serious behind it now.

"I made a promise."

The wind rustled through the empty seats.

"I said I'd fill every seat."

Yuu looked at her.

"...Why?"

Emu opened her mouth.

Then stopped.

"Oh?"

Everyone followed her gaze.

The projector booth.

Without warning, the projector switched on.

A beam of light burst across the stage.

"Is it broken?" Emu wondered.

Yuu's eyes widened.

He instinctively stepped backward.

Then another step.

A holographic figure suddenly appeared within the light.

The cheerful voice echoed throughout Wonder Stage.

Tsukasa blinked.

"...That's Hatsune Miku."

He looked around.

"I didn't know she was this park's mascot."

"She isn't."

Emu shook her head.

"Our mascot is Phenny the Phoenix Penguin."

"Then what is this?"

Miku smiled.

The projector's light grew brighter.

The hologram vanished.

Silence followed.

"She disappeared."

Emu looked around in confusion.

"What was that about?"

Tsukasa sighed.

"No offense, but I'm done."

He pulled out his phone.

"This day has been one thing after another."

His thumb moved across the screen.

"I'm calling HR and resigning."

"Really?" Yuu asked. "You won't even try?"

"Yeah."

Tsukasa answered immediately.

"This is a complete waste of time."

"Hmmm..."

Before Emu could say anything else, Tsukasa suddenly paused.

"...Huh?"

His phone screen had changed.

An unfamiliar file had appeared.

Untitled.

"What's this?"

Emu immediately leaned closer.

"Is it a song?"

"Give me some space!"

"I wanna hear it♪"

Tap.

"HEY!"

Tsukasa lunged for his phone.

"What if it's one of those scams that locks your phone and demands money?!"

The screen flashed.

Bright.

Brighter.

Then blinding.

"W-What the heck?!"

Tsukasa shielded his eyes.

"My phone's flashing!"

Emu stumbled backward.

"Eek! I can't see!"

The light swallowed both of them.

And then—

they vanished.

Silence returned to Wonder Stage.

Only Yuu remained.

"...Haa."

He rubbed the back of his neck as he stared at the empty space where they had disappeared.

"They finally entered."

His smartwatch flickered.

A tiny hologram of a glitching Miku appeared above it.

"Shouldn't we be following them?"

"Yeah."

Yuu smiled faintly.

"You're right."

He looked toward the spot once more.

"Watching their story from the front row is interestingly loud."

A familiar interface appeared before him.

Several floating planets rotated slowly in the air.

His finger moved toward one of them.

Wonderland SEKAI.

Click.

Golden light surrounded him.

The world dissolved into countless particles.

Moments later, Yuu disappeared as well.

Leaving the empty Wonder Stage behind.

[Tsukasa Tenma's Perspective]

The world exploded into light.

For a brief moment, Tsukasa felt as though the ground had vanished beneath his feet. Colors blurred together. Shapes stretched and twisted. His stomach lurched unpleasantly.

Then—

Silence.

Tsukasa stumbled forward.

"What was that...?"

He blinked several times.

The scenery around him was completely unfamiliar.

Bright colors.

Floating decorations.

Gigantic toys scattered across a landscape that seemed stitched together from a child's imagination.

Even the sky looked strange.

"Huh...?"

His eyes widened.

"Where am I?!"

He spun around.

No Wonder Stage.

No Phoenix Wonderland.

No Emu.

No Yuu.

"How did I get here?"

A pause.

"I can't see Emu or Yuu anywhere either."

Then—

He felt it.

The unmistakable sensation of being watched.

Tsukasa slowly turned.

"Uh..."

His voice echoed slightly.

"I know you're there."

A dramatic point.

"Show yourself!"

Silence.

Then—

"....."

Something stepped out from behind a giant playing card.

A round figure.

A familiar turquoise hairstyle.

A face that was somehow both adorable and terrifying.

"It's Mikudayo☆"

Tsukasa's soul nearly left his body.

"AAAAAAAAAAARGH!"

He leapt backward.

"What on earth is THAT?!"

The figure tilted its oversized head.

For a moment, neither moved.

Then Tsukasa squinted.

"...Wait."

A pause.

"It's just a costume?"

Relief immediately flooded his face.

"Oh."

He placed a hand over his chest.

"So you're a Miku mascot."

A nervous laugh escaped him.

"Haha..."

He wiped imaginary sweat from his forehead.

"You really gave me a scare."

The mascot stared blankly.

"...?"

Tsukasa cleared his throat.

"Anyway."

He pointed politely.

"Excuse me, mascot."

The mascot tilted its head again.

"Can you tell me where I am?"

"Welcome to your SEKAI!"

Tsukasa blinked.

"...Huh?"

The mascot nodded enthusiastically.

"Your SEKAI!"

"I have absolutely no idea what that means."

The mascot continued staring.

Tsukasa sighed.

"Do you mind taking off the costume and speaking normally for a minute?"

"No problem!"

The mascot nodded.

"Just a moment..."

A pause.

Another pause.

Then—

"I can't take it off."

Tsukasa stared.

"...What?"

"I can't take it off."

"..."

"..."

"...Right."

Tsukasa rolled up his sleeves.

"Fine."

He approached the mascot.

"I'll help."

The mascot obediently stood still.

Tsukasa grabbed the oversized head.

"Let's just..."

Pull.

"...give it..."

Pull harder.

"...a good..."

The mascot wobbled.

"...PULL!"

POP.

"Aah!"

The mascot's voice suddenly changed.

"That's much better♪"

Tsukasa froze.

Slowly.

Very slowly.

His eyes traveled upward.

The costume head was gone.

Standing beneath it—

was a girl with long turquoise twin-tails.

Smiling brightly.

Completely identical to the famous virtual singer.

"..."

"..."

"...You've got to be joking."

Miku tilted her head.

"Hm?"

"You're..."

Tsukasa pointed.

"Hatsune Miku."

"That's right♪"

She smiled.

"I'm Miku☆"

Tsukasa laughed.

Once.

Then twice.

Then nervously.

"No."

A shake of the head.

"No way."

He pointed again.

"Miku is a VIRTUAL SINGER."

Another point.

"Which means this is obviously some kind of elaborate special effect!"

Miku simply smiled.

"Okay♪"

Tsukasa narrowed his eyes.

"...You didn't deny it."

Before he could continue—

BWAAAAAAAH!

A triumphant trumpet fanfare blasted across the entire landscape.

Tsukasa jumped.

"Wh-What was THAT?!"

Miku gasped.

"Oh!"

She spun around.

"We have to get ready for the show!"

"What show?!"

"No time to explain!"

She grabbed his arm.

"Come on!"

Tsukasa immediately dug his heels into the ground.

"W-Wait!"

Too late.

Miku had already started dragging him.

"Don't push me!"

His feet stumbled forward.

"Where are you taking me?!"

"To the stage♪"

"THAT DOESN'T EXPLAIN ANYTHING!"

The two dashed across the colorful landscape.

Tsukasa stopped arguing.

Mostly because his brain was too busy trying to process what he was seeing.

Then, the scenery opened up.

A massive structure stood ahead.

"Huh?"

Tsukasa slowed.

The building resembled a circus tent.

And yet, it also resembled a theater.

A stage and a castle.

And a dream.

All at once.

Colorful banners fluttered overhead.

Golden lights danced across the entrance.

The entire structure radiated excitement.

Tsukasa stared.

For the first time since arriving—

He forgot to complain.

"..."

His eyes widened.

"...What is this place?"

Miku smiled.

The kind of smile that suggested the answer was obvious.

"Welcome."

She spread her arms dramatically.

"To Wonderland SEKAI♪"

Far above them, unseen by Tsukasa, somewhere overhead, another visitor had finally arrived.

Yuu.

Just in time for the chaos to begin.

As soon as they entered the massive circus-like theater, Tsukasa's eyes widened.

The inside was somehow even more unbelievable than the outside.

Colorful spotlights drifted lazily across the ceiling. Countless props lined the backstage area. Giant cards, toy soldiers, oversized balloons, and stage mechanisms filled every corner of the room.

It looked less like a theater and more like someone's dream brought to life.

A familiar blue-haired man stood near the center stage, inspecting several pieces of equipment.

"All the props are ready," he said with a satisfied nod. "And the stage lighting is all set. Today's show is going to be great as usual."

"I'm sure it will!" Emu practically bounced in place. "I can't wait for it to start, KAITO!"

Miku smiled.

"Thanks for waiting☆"

She proudly gestured behind her.

"Look who I brought with me!"

KAITO looked up.

A warm smile crossed his face.

"Thank you for going out to get him, Miku."

Then Emu suddenly pointed.

"Oh! Tsukasa!"

Her eyes sparkled.

"You came to the show too!"

Tsukasa opened and closed his mouth several times.

His brain was still attempting to process the fact that he had somehow met not one but two famous Virtual Singers.

"Is that..."

He pointed at KAITO.

"...KAITO?!"

Then his eyes darted around the room.

"And you're here too?!"

A pause.

"Wait."

His expression shifted.

"Where's Yuu?!"

"I'm here."

The familiar voice came from the entrance.

Everyone turned.

Yuu casually walked into the theater, hands in his pockets, as though entering an alternate dimension was something he did every Tuesday.

Tsukasa stared.

"...Why are you so calm?"

Yuu shrugged.

"Should I be screaming?"

"YES!"

Tsukasa pointed dramatically.

"THAT WOULD BE THE NORMAL RESPONSE!"

Miku and KAITO exchanged glances.

Then smiled.

Tsukasa noticed.

"How can you two be so calm?!"

He gestured wildly around the room.

"This isn't normal!"

His finger pointed toward Miku.

"You're Hatsune Miku!"

Then toward KAITO.

"You're KAITO!"

Then toward the colorful circus world surrounding them.

"And this place shouldn't exist!"

He threw his arms into the air.

"It's perfectly acceptable to panic right now!"

"Why?"

Emu tilted her head.

"It's really fun being here."

She spun happily.

"And I'm happy I got to meet Miku and KAITO!"

"That's not the point!"

Yuu looked around quietly.

A small smile appeared.

"This place reminds me of my childhood."

Tsukasa slowly turned.

"...You two don't have any common sense."

A sigh escaped him.

"No."

Another sigh.

"Of course you don't."

Then his eyes wandered around the theater again.

Something about it felt oddly familiar.

Strangely comforting.

As if he'd seen it before.

"That's weird..."

His voice softened.

"I swear I've seen this stage somewhere before."

KAITO nodded knowingly.

Then he stepped forward.

"Tsukasa."

The future star straightened instinctively.

"It's nice to meet you."

KAITO smiled warmly.

"As you already know, I'm KAITO."

Tsukasa nodded.

"Right..."

"I can tell you're still shaken by this unfamiliar place."

"That's one way of putting it."

"We still have some time before today's show begins."

KAITO folded his arms.

"So allow me to explain."

A few minutes later—

"This SEKAI..." His voice sounded uncertain for the first time all day. "...is a world created by my feelings?"

"Yes."

KAITO nodded. "That is correct."

Tsukasa blinked.

The explanation echoed through his mind.

Feelings.

Dreams.

A world born from them.

He remembered Miku saying the same thing earlier.

Slowly, he looked around Wonderland SEKAI.

The colorful stage.

The impossible scenery.

The overwhelming sense of wonder.

Then he looked down at his hands.

"Now I remember Miku saying that too..."

A small laugh escaped him.

Not his usual dramatic laugh.

A genuinely bewildered one.

"I'm extraordinary in many ways."

Yuu immediately looked away to hide a smile.

"But it's still difficult to believe I could create an entirely new world."

From the side, Emu raised her hand.

"I think it's amazing!"

"Eh?"

"If this world were born from your feelings, then it means your feelings are amazing too!"

A bewildered laugh escaped him.

"I'm extraordinary in many ways, but it's hard to believe I could create entirely new worlds..."

"It's not that I can't wrap my head around it," Tsukasa continued, crossing his arms. "But I do have some questions."

He pointed toward Miku and KAITO.

"First of all, why are Virtual Singers like you in this world?"

"Our role," KAITO explained, "is to help the creators of a SEKAI discover their true feelings."

"Their true feelings?"

"Yes."

KAITO smiled gently.

"Songs are crystallizations of feelings."

His gaze drifted toward the distant stage.

"When someone discovers their true feelings, those feelings become a song."

"And then?"

"Then we sing them together."

Tsukasa nodded slowly.

"...Okay."

A pause.

Then he snapped his fingers.

"I understand."

Everyone looked at him.

"What you want from me is to sing a song."

He placed a hand on his chest.

"I can do that anytime."

A confident grin appeared.

"I'll sing the song, you let me leave, and everybody wins."

He pointed toward the sky.

"I cannot afford to waste time wandering through fictional universes when I'm trying to become a star."

Miku shook her head.

"You can't sing that song."

"Huh?"

"It doesn't exist yet."

Tsukasa blinked.

"What?"

"You've forgotten your true feelings, Tsukasa."

The smile immediately vanished.

"That's impossible."

His answer came without hesitation.

"I know exactly what I feel."

His voice grew stronger.

"I know exactly what I want."

A finger pointed skyward.

"I have one goal."

Another point.

"One dream."

Another.

"One wish."

He spread both arms dramatically.

"To become the world's greatest star!"

His declaration echoed throughout the tent.

"Rain or shine! Wind or snow!"

His fist clenched.

"Even when I was bedridden with mumps, I was thinking about becoming a star!"

Silence followed.

Then Miku smiled softly.

"Don't you think there are other things important to you too?"

Tsukasa blinked.

"...Like what?"

"For example..."

Miku's smile widened.

"Making people happy."

The answer caught him off guard.

"Making people happy?"

"Think about it♪"

Miku clasped her hands together.

"Or even better."

Her eyes sparkled.

"Why don't you perform a show with us?"

Tsukasa froze.

"A show?"

"That should help you remember what you truly wanted."

"You want me to perform here?"

"In this world?"

"We get to perform with you?!"

Emu practically bounced.

"How wonderful!"

Yuu raised a hand.

"I'm interested."

"Shows in SEKAI are always great fun."

KAITO smiled.

"They're full of surprises too."

He pointed behind Tsukasa.

"Such as this."

Tsukasa slowly turned.

A stuffed rabbit floated toward him.

Suspended by colorful balloons.

"...Huh?"

His eyebrow twitched.

"Why is this sad-looking rabbit tied to balloons?"

The rabbit looked directly at him.

"Hello, Tsukasa."

Tsukasa froze.

"..."

"..."

"...It has a speaker?"

He laughed nervously.

"Good one."

The rabbit tilted its head.

"I did speak."

The laughter stopped.

"...It replied."

"Don't you remember me?"

The rabbit floated closer.

"Did you really forget?"

Tsukasa immediately backed away.

"What does it want from me?!"

The rabbit floated closer.

"This is getting disturbing!"

Closer.

"D-Don't come any closer!"

Closer.

"AAAAARGH!"

Before he could trip over himself—

A pair of arms caught him.

Firmly and Safely.

Tsukasa looked up.

Yuu was holding him before he could fall. "Are you okay?"

Miku sighed in relief.

"That was really close...!"

"Thank you, Yuu." Tsukasa immediately pointed. "But put me down!"

Yuu lowered him.

The moment his feet touched the ground, Tsukasa backed away.

"I want to get out of here!"

He pointed wildly around the tent.

"This is insane!"

His voice cracked.

"Why is this happening to me?!"

KAITO rubbed the back of his neck. "Well..." He glanced toward Miku. "This is a problem. He's not exactly in the right state of mind for discovering his true feelings."

"I've had enough!"

Tsukasa pulled out his phone?

"I'm leaving!"

His thumb moved across the screen?

"If that Untitled song brought me here, then stopping it should send me back!"

A pause.

"...Wait."

Another pause.

"...Where's my phone?"

Silence.

Tsukasa looked left.

Then right.

Then left again.

"It's gone."

His eye twitched.

"As if things weren't bad enough."

He grabbed his own head.

"AAAAARGH!"

Then suddenly, Emu raised her hand.

"Aaaanything?"

Tsukasa blinked.

"What?"

"You said you'd do anything."

A dangerous smile appeared on Emu's face.

"Will you perform with me as a cast member at Wonder Stage?"

Tsukasa immediately answered.

"If that's what it takes to leave this place, yes!"

"Yay!"

Emu reached behind her back.

Then held something up.

"Okay! Here you go!"

Tsukasa froze.

"..."

"..."

"...You had it the whole time?"

"My phone."

Emu nodded happily.

"Yeah!"

Then she pointed at Yuu. "Yuu gave it to me!"

Slowly.

Very slowly.

Tsukasa turned.

Yuu looked away.

"What?"

"Why are you looking at me like that?"

Tsukasa pointed.

"You enabled this."

"I prefer the term 'assisted.'"

Tsukasa groaned.

Then quickly snatched his phone back.

"Anyway!"

He raised it triumphantly.

"Good job, Emu." Then he looked at Yuu. "And you."

His thumb hovered over the screen.

"Now I just need to stop Untitled and—"

"Hey!"

Miku suddenly reached forward.

"Don't go yet!"

Too late.

The screen flashed.

Golden light erupted around Tsukasa and Emu.

The world began dissolving into particles.

"Wha—?!"

The light swallowed them whole.

And moments later, they disappeared.

Yuu stepped forward.

The colorful lights of the circus stage reflected faintly in his eyes as he approached the two Virtual Singers.

"Now then."

He stopped in front of them.

"It's nice to meet you."

KAITO and Miku looked at him curiously.

"My name is Hazuki Yuu."

He gave a small bow.

"It's nice to meet the KAITO and Miku of Wonderland SEKAI."

Before either of them could respond—

His smartwatch suddenly flickered.

Static crackled through the air.

Blue light distorted beside him.

Then—A familiar hologram materialized.

Or at least...

partially materialized.

The projection glitched violently.

Fragments of her body flickered in and out of existence.

Pixels drifted away from her sleeves like falling snow.

Parts of her twin-tails occasionally dissolved into static before reforming moments later.

Yet despite all of that—she smiled brightly.

"Hello!"

The hologram waved enthusiastically.

"I'm Miku!"

The reaction was immediate.

Wonderland Miku's eyes widened.

KAITO froze.

Even the cheerful Virtual Singer seemed momentarily speechless.

The Wonderland Miku took a hesitant step forward.

"What happened to you?"

Her voice carried genuine concern.

The hologram tilted her head.

"Hm?"

Then she looked down at herself.

"Oh."

A sheepish smile appeared.

"This is just my normal form."

Wonderland Miku blinked.

"...Normal?"

"Yep!"

She spun happily.

Or attempted to.

Halfway through the spin, her left arm disappeared into static.

It reappeared a second later.

"See?"

"...I don't think that's normal."

"Really?"

"Really."

The hologram giggled.

Then she floated closer.

"I'm Miku from Yuu's SEKAI!"

The atmosphere shifted.

KAITO's expression became more serious.

"...Yuu's SEKAI?"

Yuu nodded.

"My feelings created a different SEKAI."

Wonderland Miku's gaze slowly returned to the glitching hologram.

The static.

The missing fragments.

The unstable body.

The way reality itself seemed unable to fully maintain her existence.

A worried look appeared on her face.

"Then..." She hesitated. "...what happened to your world?"

For the first time, the hologram's cheerful smile weakened.

"Anyway, both of you, listen carefully. This is important."

With those words, Yuu began his discussion with the Virtual Singers.

Meanwhile...

[Changing Point of View to Tsukasa.]

"Ngh..."

A groan escaped his lips as he rubbed his forehead.

"What was..."

Slowly, he opened his eyes.

The sight before him was instantly familiar.

The rusty framework of Wonder Stage.

The worn wooden floorboards.

The faded curtains swaying gently in the breeze.

The old sign hanging overhead.

For a few seconds, Tsukasa simply stared.

Then realization hit him.

His eyes widened.

"Yes!"

He sprang to his feet.

"It's the run-down stage from earlier!"

Relief washed over him.

"I did it!"

He thrust a fist into the air.

"I escaped from that nightmare!"

Beside him, Emu twirled around happily.

"I had so much fun in that world!"

Her eyes sparkled with excitement.

"Let's make shows that are just as fun as that place!"

"Leave it to me!"

The response came out automatically.

Tsukasa froze.

A second passed.

Then another.

"...Wait."

His raised hand slowly lowered.

"Why am I suddenly involved in your shows?"

Emu blinked.

"What do you mean?"

She tilted her head innocently.

"You said you'd do anything if I helped you get back."

Tsukasa immediately looked away.

"Um..."

His voice became noticeably quieter.

"Did I really say that?"

Emu nodded vigorously.

Several times.

"I-I don't remember that."

His gaze wandered elsewhere.

"Besides, wasn't all of that basically a dream?"

"But you promised..."

The disappointment in her voice struck him harder than expected.

Tsukasa visibly flinched.

"Uh..."

His confidence crumbled instantly.

He recognized that expression.

The sad, disappointed look.

It was unfairly effective.

Before he could think of an excuse—

A booming voice echoed from behind him.

"Gotcha!"

Tsukasa nearly jumped out of his skin.

He spun around.

Standing at the entrance of Wonder Stage was a familiar mascot.

The giant phoenix-penguin costume somehow looked far more intimidating than before.

The mascot pointed dramatically at him.

"How dare you kidnap Miss Emu!"

Silence.

Tsukasa stared.

Then pointed at himself.

"K-Kidnap?!"

The mascot nodded firmly.

"You took her away."

"What?!"

"You disappeared together."

"THAT'S NOT WHAT HAPPENED!"

The mascot stepped forward.

Tsukasa instinctively stepped back.

"I demand an explanation."

"I WANT AN EXPLANATION TOO!"

Chapter 82: The Casts

The mascot's large gloved hand immediately latched onto Tsukasa's shoulder.

"K-Kidnap?!"

Tsukasa nearly choked.

"Don't try to deny it!" the mascot boomed. "I have video evidence from my hidden camera! You blinded both me and young miss with your phone and abducted her!"

"That's preposterous!"

Tsukasa pointed accusingly.

"I did not do that!"

Then another realization struck him.

"Wait! Why does a park mascot even have a hidden camera?!"

"That's irrelevant!"

The mascot's grip tightened.

"You may have realized your mistake and returned young miss safely, but your actions still constitute a crime!"

"Ugh!"

Tsukasa winced.

"It hurts! Stop that!"

Before the situation could escalate further, another hand calmly reached forward.

"Now, now..."

Yuu gently grabbed the mascot's arm.

The giant mascot actually paused.

"I was with him the entire time," Yuu said calmly. "We were behind the stage discussing ways to attract more visitors."

Then he glanced toward the others.

"Isn't that right, Tsukasa? Emu?"

Emu immediately nodded.

"Y-Yeah!"

She spread her arms between them.

"No fighting!"

Her smile brightened.

"Tsukasa is my very special friend who's going to do shows with me!"

She pointed proudly at both boys.

"And Yuu too!"

"We're going to make shows everyone will love!"

The mascot froze.

Completely.

Slowly, the oversized head turned toward Tsukasa.

"...Is that true?"

Its deep voice became oddly serious.

"You'll be working here with young miss Emu?"

Tsukasa's smile twitched.

"Well..."

"It's complicated."

The mascot's grip tightened.

At the same time—

Yuu's grip on the mascot's arm tightened as well.

The air between them suddenly became strangely intense.

Tsukasa felt sweat run down his back.

(Urgh...)

His eye twitched.

(How is this mascot so strong?!)

The mascot leaned closer.

"I asked a question."

Yuu looked at him.

"Tsukasa."

Somehow that felt even more threatening.

Tsukasa immediately straightened.

"Y-Yes!"

His voice cracked.

"That's right!"

He pointed at Emu.

Then at Yuu.

"Emu, Yuu, and I will perform here together!"

The mascot narrowed its eyes.

"Are you telling the truth?"

"Eek!"

Tsukasa instinctively recoiled.

"Y-Yes! Absolutely! Pinky swear!"

The mascot remained silent for several seconds.

Then finally—

It released him.

Emu exploded with excitement.

"Yaaay!"

She spun around happily.

"Tsukasa's joining Wonder Stage!"

Tsukasa doubled over slightly.

"*Cough*... *Cough*..."

Then he leaned toward Yuu.

"This is coercion, you know..."

Yuu simply shrugged.

"Tsukasa, you did promise back in SEKAI."

"...Don't remind me."

Emu grabbed Tsukasa's sleeve.

"Thank you sooo much!"

Her eyes sparkled.

"I'm so happy!"

She bounced in place.

"What should our first show be?"

A dramatic gasp.

"Oh!"

"What if it's about life among the stars?!"

Tsukasa rubbed his forehead.

A long sigh escaped him.

"...I suppose I don't have a choice anymore."

For a moment he stared toward the old stage.

The worn wood.

The rusted framework.

The empty seats.

Then slowly—

A smile appeared.

Not a confident one.

Not yet.

But something close.

(Hm...)

His posture straightened.

(Perhaps this isn't entirely bad.)

A future star overcoming impossible circumstances.

Starting from the very bottom.

Building his legend from a forgotten stage.

The image was admittedly compelling.

His eyes began to shine.

"Very well!"

He pointed dramatically toward the sky.

"If I'm going to do this..."

His voice echoed through the clearing.

"Then I'll create a show worthy of the future world's greatest star!"

Emu immediately copied the pose.

"Yup yup!"

Her smile widened.

"Let's make it a fun-tastic magical experience!"

"Before that," Tsukasa said, regaining some composure, "we need more members."

Emu blinked.

"Huh?"

"The three of us aren't enough?"

"Not even close."

Tsukasa folded his arms.

"Even if we include Mr. Mascot, that's still only four people."

He gestured toward the stage.

"A proper performance requires a cast."

"A larger cast means more possibilities."

"A larger cast means a better show."

Emu gasped.

"The more the merrier!"

"Exactly."

She immediately pointed somewhere random.

"Then let's go find more members!"

Before anyone could stop her—

She bolted.

"Wait!"

Tsukasa chased after her.

Yuu followed at a much calmer pace.

The three quickly left Wonder Stage behind.

As they walked through Phoenix Wonderland, Yuu glanced toward Tsukasa.

"This is getting interesting, isn't it?"

Tsukasa sighed deeply.

"Interesting isn't the word I'd use."

Then he looked at Yuu.

"Actually..."

His eyes narrowed.

"Where did you come from earlier?"

"Hm?"

"When Emu and I appeared back at the stage, you were nowhere to be found."

Yuu blinked.

Then answered casually.

"I was behind the backstage."

"Backstage?"

"Mm."

Tsukasa frowned.

"...That doesn't explain anything."

"Now, now." Yuu waved dismissively. "Don't worry about the small details."

Tsukasa immediately pointed.

"That is absolutely not a small detail!"

But Yuu was already looking ahead.

"More importantly... We need more members."

Tsukasa groaned. "Easier said than done. Where exactly are we supposed to find people willing to join this madness?"

Before anyone could answer, Emu suddenly pointed.

"Look, Tsukasa!"

Her eyes sparkled.

"Tiny robots!"

"Robots?"

Tsukasa sighed.

"Are we back to fantasy aga—"

His sentence stopped.

The robots were real.

Dozens of tiny mechanical creatures scurried across the pavement.

"...Oh."

"You weren't kidding."

A voice echoed nearby.

"Hehe."

"My little darlings seem particularly energetic today."

The trio looked up.

A tall purple-haired student stood among the tiny machines.

Several drones floated around him while miniature robots climbed across the nearby scenery.

The boy smiled.

"Why?"

He spread his arms dramatically.

"Because today, we shall perform."

"My dear mechanical actors..."

One of the drones rose into the air.

"It's showtime."

Tsukasa stared.

"What am I even looking at?"

Emu's eyes sparkled.

"Wooow!"

"Look at them!"

"All the tiny robots are listening to him!"

The boy cleared his throat.

And began narrating.

"Once upon a time..."

His voice carried effortlessly.

"There lived an eccentric alchemist."

The robots immediately began acting out the story.

Tsukasa blinked.

Everything flowed naturally.

"And those drones..."

His eyes followed the performance.

"...That's a modern take on puppet theater."

Emu pointed upward.

"They're flying now!"

The story continued.

The robots moved.

The drones danced through the air.

The audience of nearby children watched with shining eyes.

Meanwhile, Tsukasa watched the performer.

His narration, His expressions, and His stage presence.

The way he controlled every moving piece.

(Impressive.)

Very impressive.

(He created this himself?)

His eyes narrowed thoughtfully.

(If so...)

A smile slowly appeared.

(I want him.)

Not as an actor.

Not as a performer.

But as something arguably more important.

A stage director.

Then, A distant shout interrupted the story.

"YOU AGAIN!"

The performer froze.

Tsukasa blinked.

"Hm?"

The purple-haired boy immediately smiled.

"Oh dear. It seems we're due for an unscheduled intermission."

The children groaned.

"Nooo!"

The performer bowed elegantly.

"As for whether the alchemist's show was successful..."

He smiled mischievously.

"I'll leave that to your imagination."

And then, He ran.

Very fast.

Leaving behind confused children.

A confused Tsukasa.

And one extremely interested future star.

The sound of hurried footsteps cut through the amusement park walkway.

"Stop right there!"

A security staff member came panting into view, slightly bent forward as he tried to catch his breath.

"Huff... He always gives me the slip!"

Tsukasa blinked.

He slowly turned his head.

"Excuse me," Tsukasa said cautiously, "but was that guy not a park employee?"

The security staff immediately shook his head.

"No. He comes here to stage unauthorized performances."

He straightened himself.

"Every time I warn him, he disappears. But he always comes back."

Emu leaned forward, eyes sparkling.

"When can I hear the rest of the story?"

She clasped her hands together excitedly.

"I want to know if the townsfolk liked the alchemist's show!"

Tsukasa immediately turned to her.

"Hey, did you already forget what we were doing?"

His voice rose slightly.

"We were supposed to be looking for new members for our troupe."

Then he paused.

(He would've been a good pick, though.)

His gaze briefly drifted in the direction the performer had disappeared.

Yuu stood quietly, observing both of them.

"Hmm..."

His eyes narrowed slightly.

Then he spoke.

"That's Rui Kamishiro-senpai from Kamiyama High."

Tsukasa froze.

His head snapped toward Yuu.

"Eh? You know him?"

A beat.

Then the realization hit him.

"Wait—you’re also from Kamiyama?!"

Yuu nodded slightly.

"Y-Yeah... first year."

Tsukasa straightened immediately.

"So that means I'm your senpai, huh."

Yuu blinked.

"Tsukasa-senpai."

Tsukasa nodded proudly.

Then suddenly— "Wait. More importantly..."

He leaned forward.

"You said he's a Kamiyama student, right?!"

Yuu hesitated.

"Y-Yes...?"

Tsukasa's eyes lit up. "To think he was hiding right under my nose this whole time..."

He clenched his fist dramatically. "Tomorrow, Yuu! Let's meet after school!"

Yuu paused.

"O-okay."

[A day later.. The school bell rang - After school]

After school.

The hallways of Kamiyama High were filled with fading chatter and footsteps as students began heading home.

Yuu walked beside Tsukasa.

"Hello, Tsukasa-senpai. Are we meeting him now?"

Tsukasa didn't hesitate.

"Of course!"

He cleared his throat dramatically as they walked through the corridor.

They stopped in front of a classroom door.

Tsukasa pushed it open with confidence.

"Hi, I'm Tsukasa Tenma from Class A. I'm looking for Rui Kamishiro."

A student inside looked up.

"Rui? He already left. I don't know where he went."

Tsukasa blinked.

"So I just missed him..."

He crossed his arms.

"Can you at least tell me where he usually hangs out? Or could I leave a message for him?"

The student shook his head.

"Sorry, but I don't want anything to do with him. He whispers to himself and chuckles during class like he's crazy."

Tsukasa paused.

"...The more I learn about him, the more he seems like an oddball."

He turned away slightly.

"Well, I'll have a look around the school. Maybe I'll find him."

Yuu spoke calmly.

"The rooftop."

Tsukasa turned instantly.

"Rooftop? Well, that's a good spot!"

He pointed forward.

"Let's go, Yuu!"

[Kamiyama High School — Rooftop]

The door creaked open.

Tsukasa stepped forward and then stopped.

"...You're right. He is here."

Rui stood near the edge of the rooftop, the wind lightly brushing through his hair.

He turned slightly.

"Hey there, Tsukasa... and Yuu."

A faint smile appeared on his face.

"I've been waiting for you to show up."

Tsukasa blinked.

"What? How did you know?"

Rui tilted his head slightly.

"I've been watching you."

Tsukasa immediately stiffened.

"What? Don't tell me you're... a fan?!"

Rui paused.

Then let out a soft chuckle.

"A fan?"

He seemed amused.

"It's interesting that's where your thoughts went."

He gestured upward.

"You might say I'm a fan of yours."

Tsukasa froze.

"Me?!"

Rui pointed above them.

"Look up, Tsukasa."

Tsukasa did.

His eyes widened.

"Huh?! Is that a drone?! So that's what you meant by watching me?!"

Rui nodded calmly.

"Yes, indeed."

Tsukasa immediately pointed at it.

"It's got a camera and a mic?! Did you make this thing?!"

"I did indeed."

Tsukasa turned sharply.

"And the robots from your show yesterday? You made those too?"

Rui smiled faintly. "Oh, you saw my show? I wasn't aware I had FANS."

Tsukasa immediately crossed his arms.

"I didn't come here as a fan. I'm here to offer you an invitation!"

Rui tilted his head. "To what?"

Tsukasa stepped forward.

"I'll get straight to the point. I want you to make shows with me!"

Rui blinked, then smiled.

"Is that so? Hmm... that's not an unappealing idea."

Tsukasa immediately brightened.

"I knew you'd agree! Now that I have you on board—"

Rui gently lifted a hand.

"It seems we share a penchant for theater. I wish you the best of luck, Tsukasa."

Then he turned away. "Let's meet some other time again."

Footsteps echoed.

Tsukasa froze.

"Wait—what?!"

His voice cracked slightly.

"I don’t understand! I was waiting for you to profusely thank me for giving you the rare and significant opportunity to work alongside me!"

Rui stopped but did not turn around.

"Hehe."

"Unfortunately, we won’t be doing a show together."

He glanced slightly over his shoulder.

"You see, I prefer to work alone, with absolute freedom to stage any performance I want."

"As long as my shows bring joy to my audience, I’m perfectly satisfied."

Tsukasa frowned.

"You want to make your audience happy? Then you'd be making a mistake by not teaming up with me!"

Rui turned slightly.

"Oh? And why is that?"

Tsukasa pointed at himself.

"Because you'd want me, the future international superstar, on your stage!"

Rui hummed softly.

"Hm?"

Tsukasa pressed on.

"As a born star, I can deliver ultimate entertainment! And from what I've seen of your show, you'd make an excellent stage director!"

Rui gave a polite nod. "Well, thank you."

Tsukasa spread his arms.

"Give me any role, and I will perform it to 12,000% satisfaction!"

Rui’s smile deepened slightly.

"That's certainly impressive. Do you have anything to back up your claims?"

Tsukasa froze for half a second.

Then—

"You want proof?"

He grinned. "I don't have any! But what I do have is unshakable confidence in myself!"

He stepped forward. "Allow me to turn your plays into fabulous performances! Well? Don't you think we'd make an amazing team?"

His voice rose with conviction.

"If I perform in a show, it's going to be a smash hit. No doubt about it!"

Rui studied him for a long moment.

Then smiled faintly.

"Hehe... you're quite a character, aren't you?"

"I can see that doing shows together might be exciting."

Then he turned his gaze to Yuu.

"And what about you?"

Tsukasa immediately folded his arms.

"Ah, yes. Yuu."

He nodded confidently.

"While I shall naturally become the star of our troupe, Yuu will be supporting me on my path to greatness."

"That's not what I asked."

"Eh?"

Rui smiled.

"I'm asking what you want, Yuu."

Yuu blinked.

For a moment, he seemed genuinely caught off guard.

"What I want?"

"Indeed."

Rui leaned against the fence.

"Tsukasa wants to become a star."

His gaze shifted.

"Emu wants to make people smile."

Then it returned to Yuu.

"But you..."

Rui tilted his head.

"...I can't quite figure you out."

Tsukasa nodded.

"Now that you mention it..."

He pointed accusingly.

"You're suspiciously mysterious."

"I'm not."

"You absolutely are."

"Am not."

"You are."

Rui chuckled softly as the two exchanged deadpan stares.

Then Yuu sighed.

"I guess..."

His gaze drifted toward the sky.

"...I just want to watch everyone's stories unfold."

Silence.

Tsukasa blinked.

"...What?"

Yuu scratched his cheek.

"I mean, helping people achieve their dreams isn't bad."

"That's your goal?"

"Something like that."

Tsukasa looked horrified.

"That's not a goal."

"It is."

"No, it isn't."

"It is."

"That's the role of a side character!"

Yuu immediately pointed at him.

"And your dream is literally becoming the protagonist."

"Exactly!"

Tsukasa declared proudly.

"Because I am one!"

"You say that every day."

"Because it's true!"

Rui laughed.

A genuine laugh.

Not his usual amused chuckle.

For a moment, both boys looked at him.

"Hehe..."

Rui wiped a tear from the corner of his eye.

"You two are quite entertaining together."

Tsukasa straightened. "Naturally."

Then Rui became thoughtful.

His gaze shifted between them.

One dreamed of standing at the center of every stage.

The other seemed content simply helping others reach theirs.

Completely opposite.

Yet somehow—they worked surprisingly well together.

"Interesting..."

Rui murmured.

"Hm?"

Rui pushed himself away from the fence.

"Very well."

Tsukasa's eyes widened.

"Wait."

A grin slowly appeared.

"Does that mean—"

Rui's attention suddenly shifted downward.

The faint smile on his face faded into thoughtfulness.

"Hm..."

Tsukasa followed his gaze.

"What is it?" he asked. "Someone you know?"

Far below, students were leaving the campus grounds through the front gate.

Rui remained silent for a moment.

Then—

"...Perhaps this is a good opportunity after all."

Tsukasa blinked.

"Huh?"

Rui turned back toward him.

"Tsukasa, are you looking only for a stage director?"

"No."

Tsukasa crossed his arms.

"We need actors too."

Then he pointed dramatically.

"If possible, I'd like you to perform as well as direct."

Rui's smile widened.

"I see."

A brief pause followed.

Then—

"If that's the case, I will join you."

Tsukasa froze.

"...Really?"

"On one condition."

Tsukasa immediately pointed at him.

"Name it!"

Rui gestured toward the school grounds below.

"You must also invite someone I recommend."

Tsukasa considered it for roughly half a second.

"Sounds good!"

He nodded confidently.

"But this person had better be talented."

Rui chuckled. "I can personally vouch for that."

His eyes softened slightly. "We've been dabbling in theater together ever since we were children."

Tsukasa's eyes sparkled.

"That's terrific!" He clenched his fist. "I get two troupe members in one go!"

"Well then."

Rui extended a hand.

"Let's work together to create unbeatable shows."

Tsukasa immediately grabbed it.

"It'll be a pleasure having you on the team, Rui!"

The handshake lasted only a moment.

Then Tsukasa spun around dramatically.

"With that!"

He pointed toward the rooftop exit.

"I'm heading home!"

Without waiting for a response—he marched away.

The rooftop door slammed shut behind him.

Silence returned.

Only the wind remained.

Yuu stood quietly near the fence.

Rui watched the closed door for a few moments before speaking.

"...Interesting."

"Hm?"

Rui turned toward him.

For once, the usual playful expression wasn't there.

Instead—his gaze seemed oddly focused.

"Hey..."

Yuu blinked.

"...Have we met before?"

For the first time in a while—

Yuu hesitated.

Only for a second.

But Rui noticed.

"Have we?"

Yuu asked.

The question was returned so naturally that it was impossible to tell whether he genuinely didn't know or was avoiding the answer.

Rui smiled faintly.

"Fufu..."

The rooftop breeze brushed through his purple hair.

"You said earlier that you wanted to watch everyone's stories unfold."

His eyes narrowed slightly.

"A spectator."

Yuu remained silent.

"You speak as though you're watching a play."

Rui stepped closer.

"As though you're standing beyond the stage." [A/N: OMG HE SAID IT!]

"And yet..."

"You're constantly stepping onto the stage anyway."

Yuu looked away.

"...Maybe."

"Maybe?"

"You can't watch a story unfold if nobody's there to keep it moving."

Rui stared at him.

Then laughed softly.

"Hehe."

"What?"

"Nothing."

Rui walked toward the fence.

The setting sun bathed the rooftop in orange light.

"You're a strange person, Yuu."

"People tell me that a lot."

"I imagine they do."

For a while, neither spoke.

Then Rui suddenly glanced sideways.

"Tell me."

"Hm?"

"If one day you found a story you truly wanted to be part of..."

The question hung in the air.

Rui's smile became almost unreadable.

"Would you remain a spectator?"

Yuu froze.

For some reason—he couldn't answer immediately.

And that alone felt like an answer.

Rui chuckled.

"I see."

"What do you mean by that?"

"Nothing at all."

Rui began walking toward the rooftop door.

"But I think..."

He paused before opening it.

"...you're much more interesting than you realize."

The door clicked open.

Then closed.

Leaving Yuu alone beneath the evening sky.

"...Interesting, huh."

The next day arrived faster than expected.

Classes ended.

The final bell echoed throughout Kamiyama High.

And before long—

Wonder Stage had gained two new visitors.

"Say hello to our new stage director!"

Tsukasa spread his arms dramatically as he stood in the center of the stage.

Emu immediately lit up.

"Wow!"

She rushed forward.

"You're the performer from yesterday!"

Then she threw both hands into the air.

"Welcome, and wonderhoy☆"

Rui smiled politely.

"Hm..."

His eyes wandered around the aging theater.

"I wasn't aware this stage existed."

His gaze swept across the weathered seats, faded curtains, and rusted framework. "It's old."

Then he smiled. "But remarkably well-maintained."

He turned toward Emu. "You must be the other cast member Tsukasa mentioned."

He gave a small bow. "I'm Rui Kamishiro. Nice to meet you."

Emu returned the bow instantly.

"Nice to meet you too, Rui!"

Then she leaned forward excitedly.

"Please tell me!"

"When will you perform the next part of yesterday's story?"

Rui blinked.

"You watched it?"

"Yup!"

A smile appeared on Rui's face.

"I'm not sure when."

His voice softened slightly.

"But I can promise you this."

"Someday, I will finish that story."

Emu's eyes sparkled. "You really promise?"

"I give you my word."

Emu immediately beamed.

"Hehe!"

"Thanks!"

Then she suddenly remembered something.

"Oh!"

"My name's Emu Otori!"

Rui paused. "Otori..."

Something flickered across his face.

"Hm..."

Before he could continue—

Emu had already moved on.

"Rui!"

"Can we use your flying zoom-zooms in our shows?!"

"Flying... zoom-zooms?"

"My drones?"

"Yup yup!"

Rui chuckled.

"Of course."

Emu gasped.

"Omigosh!"

"Can you make them go fwooooooosh?"

Rui immediately considered the request.

"Like shooting stars?"

He placed a hand on his chin.

"It would certainly be fascinating to observe plasma formation around a drone traveling at forty kilometers per second."

Emu nodded seriously.

Then shook her head.

"Oh!"

"But it'd also be amazing if they could flutter-putter!"

"Flutter-putter..."

Rui nodded.

"Ah."

"The flight pattern of the blue admiral butterfly."

He smiled.

"That would indeed be aesthetically pleasing."

Tsukasa stared.

Then stared harder.

Then stared even harder.

"...Are you two actually communicating?"

His voice carried genuine concern.

"I'm so confused."

A pause.

Then his eyes drifted toward Yuu.

"...WAIT."

Tsukasa pointed dramatically.

"Yuu's face is pale!"

Yuu blinked.

"It's hard to understand them."

"Wake up to reality, Yuu!"

"I am awake."

"You don't sound awake."

"I don't understand half of what they're talking about."

"Exactly!"

Tsukasa pointed triumphantly.

"Neither do I!"

For the first time all afternoon—

Tsukasa felt understood.

Then he cleared his throat.

Returning to business.

"But more importantly."

He turned toward Rui.

"Where's the other person you wanted to invite?"

Rui smiled.

"Ah."

"I actually came with her."

Tsukasa looked around.

Nobody.

Emu looked around too.

Still nobody.

Yuu quietly checked behind a prop box.

Nothing.

"However..."

Rui continued.

"She's remarkably shy."

He began walking toward the backstage area.

"Wait a moment."

"I'll go get her."

Emu clasped her hands together.

"I wonder what she's like!"

"This is so exciting!"

Tsukasa nodded confidently.

"Indeed."

He crossed his arms.

"At long last, we have enough members." His eyes sparkled. "The curtain shall soon rise on our first performance!"

A few moments later—

Footsteps returned from backstage.

Rui emerged.

Pushing something or rather—someone.

"Apologies for the wait."

He stopped beside the stage.

"Here she is."

Power On.

Tsukasa and Emu froze.

Both pointed simultaneously.

"She's a robot?!"

Yuu's eyes widened.

"Hoo?"

Chapter 83: Units! Assemble!!

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

Emu immediately circled around the machine with sparkling eyes.

"Wow!"

She spread her arms dramatically.

"That's a big robot!"

Then she tilted her head.

"She comes up to my waist!"

Tsukasa stared.

Then stared harder.

Then pointed directly at Rui.

"What is this, Rui?! You were supposed to bring a new cast member!"

He pointed at the robot.

"Not another robot!"

Rui remained perfectly calm.

"It's a little complicated. First, I should explain that this isn't an autonomous robot like the ones I used during yesterday's performance."

He patted the machine proudly.

"This one is remotely controlled."

Tsukasa blinked.

"...You made it yourself?"

"I did indeed."

The pride in Rui's voice was unmistakable.

"It only requires charging once every three days."

He continued as though reading from a product catalog.

"It contains numerous functions optimized specifically for theatrical performances." A small smile appeared. "I'm quite pleased with the final result."

Yuu folded his arms.

"At this point, I'm honestly impressed by your skill."

Rui placed a hand over his chest.

"Why, thank you."

"Stop accepting compliments!"

Tsukasa shouted.

"I don't need your boasting!"

He marched forward.

"More importantly—"

His finger jabbed toward the robot.

"Where is the person controlling this thing?"

The robot remained silent.

"..."

Rui glanced toward a nearby prop storage area.

"She's nearby."

His smile returned.

"Don't worry."

"She has received full training in operating the robot."

Tsukasa let out a long sigh.

"Listen, Rui."

He rubbed his forehead.

"We're looking for an actual cast member."

His gaze shifted to the robot.

"Not a machine."

Suddenly—

The robot's eyes narrowed.

"You got a problem with me?"

The mechanical voice echoed through the stage.

Emu gasped.

"Oooh!"

Her eyes sparkled even brighter.

"She spoke!"

Rui nodded.

"Yes."

"Through the robot, she can communicate with us."

He pointed toward the robot's eyes.

"She can also see everything through its display system."

Emu immediately waved enthusiastically.

"I'm Emu Otori!"

She bounced on her heels.

"It's nice to meet you, Little Robot♪"

The robot paused.

"Otori...?" A slight tilt of the head. "That name sounds familiar..."

Emu grinned.

"Little Robot, do you have a name?"

The robot froze.

"...A name."

A brief silence followed.

"Um..."

Rui suddenly looked thoughtful.

"Now that I think about it..." He tapped his chin. "We never actually named the robot."

Then he turned toward the machine.

"Could you tell them your own name instead?"

Another pause.

"...Nene Kusanagi."

Emu's eyes widened.

"Thanks!"

Then she immediately clapped her hands together.

"I'll call the robot Robo-Nene♪"

The robot visibly twitched.

"Robo-Nene..."

A long pause.

"...I guess that's fine."

Tsukasa stepped forward.

"If we're capable of holding a conversation through this contraption, then I have something to say."

He pointed dramatically.

"Nene Kusanagi!"

The robot looked at him.

"You obviously can't dance."

Point.

"Or sing."

Point.

"Or perform properly while hiding inside a robot."

Point.

"I'm sorry."

He crossed his arms.

"But we cannot accept you as a member of our troupe."

Silence.

The robot stared at him.

Then—

"Hmph." The mechanical eyes narrowed. "You call yourself a star..."

A dangerous pause.

"...but you can't even recognize talent when it's standing right in front of you?"

Tsukasa froze.

"...Wh-What?!"

"You think a robot can't dance?"

The glowing eyes narrowed.

"Maybe you need a demonstration."

Rui immediately nodded.

"That's a wonderful idea, Nene."

He turned toward Emu.

"Would you mind putting on some music?"

Emu saluted enthusiastically.

"Sure☆"

She hurried over to the sound equipment.

Then pointed dramatically at Robo-Nene.

"Robo-Nene!"

She grinned.

"It's showtime!"

Music erupted from the speakers.

Tsukasa folded his arms confidently.

"Hmph. You may try." He glanced toward Rui. "No matter how skilled you are at building robots, it can't possibly—"

The rest of the sentence died instantly.

Tap.

Tap-tap.

Tap-tap-tap-tap-tap.

Tsukasa froze.

"...She's tap dancing?!"

The tiny mechanical feet moved across the stage with astonishing speed.

Sharp rhythmic beats echoed throughout Wonder Stage.

"With those stubby little legs?!"

Yuu clapped politely.

"That's impressive."

"Hehe."

Rui looked positively delighted.

"Very good, Nene."

Emu bounced excitedly.

"Whoa!"

"Her feet are tap-tapping so fast!"

Then the music changed.

The robot spun.

Pivoted.

Glided across the stage.

A smooth jazz routine unfolded before their eyes.

Tsukasa stared in horror.

"And now a smooth jazz dance?!"

His voice cracked.

"This shouldn't be possible with that short, squat stature!"

Emu immediately erupted into applause.

"That's awesome!"

"Robo-Nene, you're a great dancer!"

The robot turned toward Tsukasa.

"Well?"

Tsukasa quickly recovered.

"Uh..."

He pointed dramatically.

"Dancing is only one part of a musical!"

His confidence returned.

"Singing is equally important!"

He crossed his arms.

"I cannot have a poor singer in my cast."

"Hmph." The robot lifted its chin.

"So if I sing..." A pause. "...I'm hired?"

Tsukasa blinked.

"Huh?"

Then—

A beautiful melody flowed through Wonder Stage.

"————♪"

The singing voice was gentle.

Clear.

Delicate.

Every note landed perfectly.

The stage fell silent.

Even the wind seemed to stop.

When the song ended—

Emu's eyes sparkled.

"Wooow!"

"That was beautiful!"

"And your singing voice is beautiful too!"

Tsukasa's jaw dropped.

"No way..."

Then realization struck.

"Ah!"

He pointed triumphantly.

"I understand!"

"That was a recording!"

"A recording of someone else singing!"

Emu tilted her head.

"But Tsukasa..."

"That was Robo-Nene's voice."

Tsukasa immediately deflated.

"...Uh."

The robot folded its arms again.

"What now?"

"Anything else you want me to prove?"

Tsukasa opened his mouth.

Then closed it.

Then opened it again.

"...Um."

Yuu sighed.

"Give it up, Tsukasa-senpai."

"I refuse."

"You already lost."

"I haven't lost."

"You absolutely lost."

"I haven't."

Rui chuckled.

"Well, Tsukasa?"

His smile widened.

"Does Nene not meet all your requirements?"

Tsukasa hesitated.

"...I suppose she's good enough."

Then his eyes narrowed suspiciously.

"But what if she steals the spotlight from me?"

A pause.

"No."

He shook his head.

"Impossible."

"I am the true star here."

The robot immediately replied.

"You don't have to let me join if it's going to make you feel insecure."

Tsukasa nearly jumped.

"Y-You heard that?!"

He straightened immediately.

"I shall become the world's greatest star!"

He pointed dramatically at the sky.

"Insecurity is a feeling entirely alien to me!"

"Oh?"

The robot tilted its head.

"Really?"

"Why are you looking at me like that?!"

"Oh."

The robot shrugged.

"You could tell?"

A pause.

"How amazing, Mr. Future Star."

Tsukasa pointed accusingly.

"You're awfully confrontational."

Then he smirked.

"But I understand."

The smirk grew.

"You're simply jealous of my talent."

Rui laughed.

A genuine laugh.

"Haha."

"I can already tell."

"You two are going to get along wonderfully."

"NO WE WON'T."

Both Tsukasa and Robo-Nene shouted simultaneously.

Emu ignored them completely.

She grabbed Tsukasa's arm.

"Tsukasa!"

"Tsukasa!"

"I want to do shows with Robo-Nene!"

Her eyes sparkled.

"She's amazing!"

"It must be because she loves theater so much!"

"And she practiced lots and lots!"

"I adore her!"

Tsukasa looked between Emu, Rui, and Robo-Nene.

Then sighed deeply.

"...Fine."

He folded his arms.

"I admit her singing and dancing are acceptable."

Emu gasped.

"Then—"

She leaned forward.

"Then she can join us?!"

"Can she?"

Tsukasa pointed dramatically.

"Very well! I shall allow it!"

He struck a heroic pose.

"She shall become our fifth member!"

Emu jumped.

"Yaaay!"

She immediately rushed toward Robo-Nene.

"Welcome to the team, Robo-Nene!"

"And Nene!"

The robot looked slightly embarrassed.

"...Thanks."

Tsukasa nodded proudly.

"You should be grateful for my magnanimity."

The robot's eyes glowed.

"Don't even think about sabotaging me on stage."

A mechanical humming sound echoed.

"Or I'll fire my beam at you."

Tsukasa froze.

"...Beam?" A pause. "THIS THING HAS A LASER?!"

Yuu laughed quietly.

"I'm looking forward to working with both of you."

He looked toward Rui.

"Kamishiro-senpai. Robo-Nene."

The robot seemed slightly pleased.

Rui simply smiled.

Emu threw both hands into the air.

"Let's make wonderful shows together, everyone!"

The afternoon sunlight shone brightly over Wonder Stage.

For the first time in years—the abandoned stage felt alive.

A little while later.

The others had already gone home.

Wonder Stage grew quiet.

Only Rui remained.

And beside him—

Robo-Nene.

Rui glanced around.

"Nene."

"They've gone."

"You can come out now."

A moment later—from behind the stage curtains—a girl slowly emerged.

An expression somewhere between embarrassed and annoyed.

Nene Kusanagi.

She stared at the robot.

Then at Rui.

Then sighed.

"There's got to be something wrong with all of them."

Rui chuckled.

"Oh?"

"They hired a robot as a troupe member."

She rubbed her forehead.

"Who does that?"

"I agree."

Rui nodded thoughtfully.

"They all seem rather insane."

Nene immediately pointed at him.

"Look who's talking."

"You suddenly appeared with a giant robot."

"You invited me to do theater again."

"Like that's normal."

Rui smiled.

"It isn't?"

"No."

She folded her arms.

"And you knew I'd already given up."

For a brief moment—

Rui's smile softened.

"Really?"

He tilted his head.

"Then why did you come?"

Nene froze.

"...You're an awful human being."

"Hehe."

Rui looked entirely unrepentant.

"We both have our flaws."

Nene groaned.

Rui gazed toward the stage.

"Besides. Aren't you getting tired of spending every day at home playing games?"

Nene looked away.

"This could be a new game."

His smile returned. "Try having some fun."

Silence.

Nene didn't answer.

But—

She didn't leave either.

And Rui noticed.

Meanwhile...

[Changing Perspective to Hazuki Yuu]

"So far, there's been no sign of an anomaly occurring yet..."

Yuu's gaze remained fixed on the glowing screen of his smartwatch as he sat beneath the shade of a tree near Phoenix Wonderland.

Beside the time display, a tiny hologram of Glitching Miku floated cross-legged in midair.

"That's good, isn't it?" she asked.

"Yeah."

Yuu nodded.

"The four members are finally here."

A small smile appeared on his face.

"Now it's showtime."

The story was moving forward again.

Just as it should.

At noon...

[Changing Perspective to Tsukasa Tenma]

Sunlight poured through the curtains of the Tenma household.

Papers were scattered across Tsukasa's desk.

Scripts.

Notes.

Rough sketches of stage layouts.

Ideas for dramatic entrances.

And naturally—several pages dedicated entirely to scenes where the hero looked exceptionally cool.

Tsukasa sat proudly in front of his masterpiece.

Pen in hand.

"And then," he declared dramatically, "I make my grand appearance!"

He scribbled another note onto the script.

"Yes."

A satisfied grin spread across his face.

"This is a pretty good storyline."

The bedroom door slid open.

Saki peeked inside.

"Are you writing a new play, Onii-chan?"

Tsukasa immediately straightened.

"Yes, I am!"

He proudly lifted several pages.

"My troupe is working on our first show."

A grin flashed across his face.

"I'm making a rough draft of the script."

Saki's eyes sparkled.

"That's so cool!"

She stepped closer.

"When is the play?"

"I'd love to see it!"

"We've got it scheduled for the first day of the school break."

Tsukasa tapped the script.

"Starting at noon."

Saki's smile instantly fell.

"Oh no..." She lowered her shoulders. "I'm working on that day."

A disappointed sigh escaped her lips.

"I'm so sad I'll miss it..."

Tsukasa blinked.

"Oh right."

His expression softened.

"I keep forgetting you got that café job."

He crossed his arms thoughtfully.

"And you also joined a school club?"

"Are you sure you can handle all that?"

"Of course!"

Saki smiled brightly.

"No problem!"

Then her smile softened.

"Although..."

"I'll be more careful not to overdo things."

Her voice became quieter.

"So that I don't worry everyone again..."

Tsukasa froze.

For a moment—the room became silent.

"...Saki."

Tsukasa suddenly stood up.

"I am Pegasus, prince of this land!"

Saki jumped.

"O-Onii-chan, what are you saying?"

Tsukasa raised one arm dramatically toward the ceiling.

"My journey to defeat the dastardly demon lord has only just begun!"

His voice boomed through the room.

"It will certainly be rife with peril!"

"But at the end of it..."

A confident smile appeared.

"Surely there is hope!"

"The strength of my conviction banished all fear from my heart!"

For a brief moment—

Saki simply stared.

Then she laughed.

A warm, familiar laugh.

"Hehe."

"Thank you."

Her smile carried years of memories behind it.

"You've always been doing performances for me."

"Ever since we were little."

Tsukasa blinked.

"Hm?"

"You'd make my plushies characters in your plays, remember?"

Saki giggled.

"My bunny plushie often got the leading role."

"A bunny plushie?"

Tsukasa tilted his head.

"I'm not sure I recall using that one."

"It got terribly worn out from all those imaginary adventures."

Saki smiled fondly at the memory.

"But I loved seeing it in your plays."

She looked toward the pile of scripts on his desk.

"I hope your new show turns out great."

Her voice became gentle.

"Seeing you doing what you enjoy makes me happy too."

For a moment—

Tsukasa stood completely still.

Then he smiled.

A genuine one.

"You can be sure it will be phenomenal!"

The confidence immediately returned.

"As expected of the future world's greatest star!" Saki laughed again. "That's my Onii-chan."

The next day...

Wonder Stage buzzed with unusual energy that afternoon.

Props were stacked near the wings. Costumes hung from temporary racks. Even the old wooden stage seemed livelier than usual, as though it too was anticipating the troupe's first performance.

At the center of it all stood Tsukasa.

A thick stack of papers rested proudly in his hand.

"Guys!" he announced dramatically. "I've finished writing the script for our very first performance!"

Rui, who had been adjusting a prop nearby, looked up.

"You wrote it?"

"Yes!" Tsukasa declared. "And I can tell you that it does me great justice, putting me in a role perfect for a brilliant star!"

Robo-Nene folded her small mechanical arms.

"Hmm. If this is your masterpiece, it should reveal how smart you actually are."

A vein twitched on Tsukasa's forehead.

"Grr... Always trying to pick a fight with me, huh? Well, I'm sorry if you don't understand the script, but I'm not going to bother explaining it to you!"

"That's fine," Robo-Nene replied immediately. "Your explanations would only make it worse."

A brief silence followed.

Then Yuu snorted.

Rui covered his mouth.

Even Emu giggled.

Tsukasa stared.

"You too?!"

Emu smiled brightly.

"They've really taken to each other♪"

"Indeed," Rui agreed. "They're unusually well-matched."

"We are not well-matched!" Tsukasa and Robo-Nene blurted simultaneously.

The others laughed.

Tsukasa cleared his throat loudly.

"I have one more important announcement to make!"

Emu immediately perked up.

"Oh! What is it?"

"The name for our troupe!" Tsukasa declared proudly. "If we're going to stage official performances, we must have a name!"

Rui nodded.

"That is a good point. What did you have in mind?"

Tsukasa struck a pose.

"Ahem..."

He raised one finger dramatically.

"The Pegasus Soaring in the Sky Troupe!"

Silence.

Complete silence.

Even the breeze seemed to stop.

Tsukasa blinked.

Then blinked again.

"...Why is everyone staring at me?!"

"Wow," Robo-Nene said flatly. "That sucks."

Tsukasa nearly dropped the script.

"Wh-What did you say?! What could you possibly not like about it? It oozes stylishness!"

Rui rubbed his chin thoughtfully.

"Well, it's not easy to explain what exactly makes it uncool, but I think most of us can agree that..."

"It just sucks," Robo-Nene finished.

"Yes," Rui said.

"I agree," Yuu added.

Tsukasa looked personally betrayed.

"How rude, dismissing a name I spent so much time coming up with! But if you're so clever, do YOU have any suggestions?!"

Rui considered for a moment.

"Well, let's ask around. Emu, what name would you propose?"

Emu immediately began bouncing.

"Hmm... How about..."

She raised both hands.

"Sunshine World Sunny Funny Power?"

The group stared.

"Or..."

She spun around dramatically.

"Flower World Blooming Blossom Parade?"

Robo-Nene slowly turned toward her.

"Those sound more like kids' TV shows."

Tsukasa pinched the bridge of his nose.

"Why do you have to have 'world' in every name?"

"Because the Wonder Stage becomes different worlds during shows!"

Emu spread her arms wide.

"It can be a jungle world, or a world above the clouds, or a prehistoric world, or an alien planet!"

Her eyes sparkled.

"It's a wonderland that can be anything you dream of!"

She spun happily in place.

"Every time the curtain rises, a new adventure begins, and it makes everyone in the audience happy and excited!"

The others fell silent.

Even Tsukasa listened.

Rui smiled.

"Hmm..."

He looked at Emu.

"Why don't we go with that?"

"Huh?" Tsukasa blinked.

"We could base our name on Emu's wish that everyone has a great time watching the stories played out in the wonderland of the stage."

Emu tapped her chin.

"A Great Time in the Wonderland?"

Nearby, Yuu quietly smiled.

(It's Wonderland×Showtime.)

Robo-Nene tilted her head.

"Maybe..."

Everyone looked toward her.

"Instead of 'great time,' it can be 'showtime.'"

A pause.

"Then we can put it together as..."

She looked at the others.

"Wonderland Showtime?"

Emu's eyes lit up instantly.

"Ooh, that sounds cool!"

Before anyone could stop her, she grabbed the script from Tsukasa's hands.

"I'll write our new name on the script!"

"No!" Tsukasa lunged forward. "Hang on! This name has got nothing on The Pegasus Soaring in the Sky!"

Emu ignored him completely.

"There!"

She proudly held up the script.

"Wonderlands×Showtime!"

Tsukasa stared.

"Wait, why did you put an x there?"

He pointed accusingly.

"And why is it plural?"

"You see..."

Emu beamed.

"It's because every new show creates a new wonderland, so they multiply!"

She pointed at the large X she'd written.

"Besides, it looks cooler that way!"

"No, it doesn't..."

"Hmm..." Robo-Nene examined the page. "It's not bad, actually."

"Yes," Rui agreed. "I have no objections either. Sometimes going with your first thought is best."

Yuu nodded.

"No objection here."

Tsukasa's shoulders slumped.

"But not my first thought, huh..."

A long sigh escaped him.

"...Well, the shows themselves are more important than the name of the troupe."

He folded his arms.

"At least we have a name now, so we can move on to preparing for our first performance!"

"Yay!"

Emu threw both fists into the air.

"Let's do this, everyone☆"

And just like that—

Wonderlands×Showtime was born.

Chapter End Notes

Quick Question: Why is pushing a character into absolute despair necessary for a triumphant ending?

Answer: Despair serves as the ultimate narrative crucible. When a character is stripped of their comfort zones, they are forced to abandon the flawed worldview or limitations that held them back.

Chapter 84: To Intervene

sukasa proudly handed the script to the others.

Rui accepted it first, quietly flipping through the pages while the rest gathered around.

For several moments, only the rustling of paper could be heard.

Then Rui nodded.

"Yes, I see where you're going with this script. Pegasus Odyssey is an orthodox heroic epic."

Tsukasa immediately crossed his arms.

"Naturally."

Rui continued reading.

"The protagonist, Prince Pegasus, embarks on a journey to slay the demon lord who has been causing great suffering to the people of his kingdom."

He turned a page.

"Pegasus finds new allies on his travels."

Another page.

"His first great deed is saving a village from a terrifying dragon."

Another.

"Many adventures later, the prince duels the demon lord."

And another.

"He prevails and returns to his town as a hero."

Rui closed the script.

"Tsukasa, I have some ideas for this play. Would you like to hear them?"

Tsukasa's eyes lit up.

"Oh, you already have something? Tell me, then, I'm curious."

Rui smiled.

"I'd like to emphasize the hardships the prince must suffer on his journey to make the audience sympathize with him more."

"Hmm, yes."

Tsukasa nodded thoughtfully.

Rui's smile widened.

"I think some lightning strikes would be excellent for this purpose."

"Hmm, yes..."

Tsukasa froze.

"...No, hold on!"

"Zippy zaps!" Emu cheered. "That's sooo cool!"

"Right?" Rui said enthusiastically.

Without warning, he produced a strange metallic device from seemingly nowhere.

"I brought along this plasma generator—"

"Wait a minute!" Tsukasa shouted. "Why do you even have a gizmo like that?!"

Yuu instinctively took a step back.

"I'd also like to know..."

His eyes remained fixed on the machine.

"It's scary."

"Oh, I thought it might come in handy."

Tsukasa stared at him.

"Who'd think that, ever?!"

He pointed accusingly at the machine.

"Not to mention this must be incredibly dangerous!"

Rui waved the concern away.

"Don't worry. The device can be securely attached to the stage in a way that will keep the audience perfectly safe."

His smile remained pleasant.

"Please make sure you don't touch it or you'll die."

A heavy silence followed.

Tsukasa slowly pointed at himself.

"What about keeping ME safe?!"

Robo-Nene sighed.

"And so it starts again..."

Emu tilted her head.

"What does?"

"When Rui gets excited about an idea for a show, he just has to try it out."

Robo-Nene's voice carried the exhausted tone of someone speaking from experience.

"He tried suspending classmates from ropes in the school gym, or holding them underwater in the pool..."

Yuu's eyes widened.

"SO that rumor was real?!"

"But why?" Emu asked innocently. "It all sounds fun to me!"

Robo-Nene looked at her.

"Maybe that's the problem."

She paused.

"That there aren't more people as enthusiastic as you are, Emu..."

"I'm not going to risk my life on-stage!" Tsukasa declared.

Rui looked genuinely disappointed.

"But you said you'd perform any role I gave you to, quote, 12,000%, unquote."

The stage director closed the script.

A dramatic sigh escaped him.

"I'm afraid that I have no choice but to step down as a stage director."

He turned away.

"Nene, good luck working with these people."

"N-Now wait just a second!"

Tsukasa lunged forward immediately.

"You can't just quit because I don't want to be electrocuted!"

"Can I not?" Rui asked.

"No!"

"I see."

Rui paused.

"Then perhaps we can negotiate."

Tsukasa suddenly looked suspicious.

"...Why do I feel like that's somehow even worse?"

“Whaaat? We won't be doing the zippy zaps? But lightning bolts on stage would easily be the highlight of our play!”

“Highlight?!” Tsukasa repeated.

He folded his arms and tilted his head thoughtfully.

“Hmmm. I can see how they would make it an electrifying performance in more ways than one... It would be an unprecedented spectacle, sure to draw attention.”

Emu's eyes sparkled.

“And then we'd have lots and lots of people coming to see our show!”

Tsukasa visibly wavered.

“Ngh!”

He turned toward Rui.

“Rui... If it's just a few lightning bolts, maybe we could give it a try.”

Rui blinked.

“Hm?”

“It's not because an electric show like that would make me famous! But I think that innovation is key to excellent theater!”

“I'll get the emergency hotline ready just incase~” Yuu said casually.

“Stop that!”

“I see...” Rui placed a hand beneath his chin. “Well, in that case... How about also adding some realism to the dragon fight scene by means of a modified flamethrower?”

“A... flamethrower?!”

“The final battle with the demon lord could be made more epic if you were launched ten meters into the air before landing to deliver the final blow. I've recently constructed a powerful air jet which can be installed in the stage floor.”

Tsukasa stared at him.

Slowly.

Very slowly.

“Do you have any suggestions that AREN'T extremely hazardous?”

Then he paused.

“B-But... They would certainly wow the audience.”

His eyes narrowed with determination.

“As a true star, I should be able to rise to the challenge!”

“Yaaay!” Emu bounced excitedly. “All of these ideas are amazing! Do you have any more?”

Rui's smile widened.

“Well, since this is an outdoor stage, we could construct a waterfall...”

“Don't encourage him or he'll get out of control...” Robo-Nene muttered.

And so the planning session continued.

One outrageous idea led to another.

Rui enthusiastically sketched dangerous stage mechanisms.

Emu approved nearly every suggestion with endless excitement.

Robo-Nene repeatedly questioned everyone's sanity.

Yuu mostly watched from the side, occasionally contributing practical ideas whenever the conversation threatened to become completely unhinged.

And Tsukasa—

Somehow—

Found himself seriously considering whether surviving explosions, lightning, fire, and aerial launches was simply part of becoming a star.

By the time the sun dipped below the horizon, the entire group looked exhausted.

“Phew...” Tsukasa slumped into a chair.

“We had so much to talk about, it took up the entire day...”

He stood up and pointed dramatically toward the sky.

“We'll meet here tomorrow at 7:00 AM! Check before you leave that you haven't forgotten your staff cards!”

“See you tomorrow!” Emu, Rui, Yuu, and Robo-Nene replied.

The group gradually dispersed as evening settled over Phoenix Wonderland.

[Changing Perspective to Rui Kamishiro]

At Miyamasuzaka Street.

The streets were bathed in orange twilight.

Rui and Nene walked side by side in comfortable silence.

After a while, Nene glanced toward him.

“I haven't seen you in such a good mood in a while.”

“Who, me?” Rui smiled. “I'm always in a good mood.”

He stopped at a nearby intersection.

“Nene, I'm heading the other way. See you tomorrow.”

“Oh?” Nene blinked. “You're not going home yet?”

“No.”

Rui's smile widened slightly.

“I need to buy some more parts for modding some stage equipment. I have my work cut out for me.”

Nene watched him disappear down the street.

“.....”

A small sigh escaped her.

“He really seems happy.”

The next day.

At Wonder Stage.

“Huff... Huff... Huff...”

Tsukasa doubled over, breathing heavily.

Hours of rehearsal had already passed.

“Interesting,” Robo-Nene remarked. “I thought all that was remarkable about you was the size of your ego, but you're not too bad at acting and dance.”

“Why, thank—”

“It's still nowhere near good enough,” she added immediately.

Tsukasa's eye twitched.

Rui ignored the exchange entirely.

“Yes, that was passable, but this style of fighting seems too bland for Prince Pegasus.”

He gestured toward the stage.

“You need to use your whole body to make it more expressive.”

“I'll try it another way...” Tsukasa straightened himself.

Then he lunged forward dramatically.

“How about now!”

Rui observed him carefully.

“That's much better movement, but it only makes the other areas you're lacking in more apparent.”

“Huff... Huff...”

Tsukasa collapsed onto one knee.

“I'm spent!”

“Here.”

Yuu stepped forward and handed him a water bottle.

“Make sure to hydrate.”

“Oh?”

Rui looked amused.

“So soon?”

“Uh!”

Tsukasa pointed accusingly at him. “I've hired a tyrannical director..!”

“It's for the plot, Tsukasa-senpai.”

“What's the problem, future super-star?” Robo-Nene asked. “Was that the best you can do?”

“No, of course not!”

Tsukasa immediately stood back up.

“But I wish you gave me some hints on how to improve...”

“Oh! I know where we can go for ideas!”

Rui looked interested.

“Yes? And where would that be?”

Emu grinned mischievously.

“He he he... You know where, right? Yuu-kun!?”

Yuu immediately felt a bad feeling.

“Don't tell me...”

“Miku's SEKAI!”

Emu proudly raised her phone.

“I have this song on my phone, Untitled, that I can play to take us there instantly!”

“What?”

Robo-Nene stared.

Tsukasa's face immediately paled.

“You have Untitled on your phone too?!”

He pointed at her in horror.

“You're seriously suggesting we go to that crazy place again?!”

“It just appeared on my phone before I knew it!”

Emu spun around happily.

“Tsukasa, let's introduce Rui and Robo-Nene to Miku and KAITO!”

“No!”

Tsukasa took several steps backward.

“Stop!”

“I don't wanna go!”

Unfortunately for him—

Emu had already tapped the song.

The familiar melody echoed through Wonder Stage.

Light burst from the screen.

“Wait—!”

Too late.

Brilliant colors flooded the stage.

Tsukasa, Emu, Rui, Robo-Nene, and Yuu were swallowed by the radiance.

And in the next instant—

The five vanished from Wonder Stage.

The world of vibrant colors and impossible wonders stretched endlessly beneath a painted sky.

Tsukasa immediately recognized where they were.

His face lost all color.

“Oh no...”

He slowly turned toward Emu.

“No, no, no!”

His voice rose several octaves.

“Not this again!”

Beside him, Robo-Nene looked around in confusion.

“Huh... Where are we?!”

Rui adjusted his posture as he examined the scenery with intense interest.

“Were we teleported or something?”

“Emu,” Tsukasa said, grabbing her shoulders dramatically. “Take us back right now!”

Before Emu could answer—

A cheerful voice echoed across the stage.

“Oh my! There are so many of you today☆ Yay!”

A familiar turquoise-haired girl skipped toward them.

“Miku!”

Emu immediately waved both arms.

“Mikuuu! We came to say hi!”

Robo-Nene blinked.

“Miku?”

“KAITO?”

Her gaze shifted toward the blue-haired singer standing nearby.

“Wait... there are no projections?”

“That's right!” Miku spun happily. “Welcome to SEKAI☆”

Yuu folded his arms and smiled faintly. “Welcome to Wonderland SEKAI, both of you.”

Nearby, KAITO stepped forward.

“Welcome back, Tsukasa, Yuu, and Emu.”

A gentle smile appeared on his face.

“I'm glad to see you've brought friends along this time.”

“Hello, KAITO!” Emu beamed. “We'll be doing shows together, the five of us!”

Meanwhile, Robo-Nene's confusion only deepened.

“That's Hatsune Miku... And KAITO?”

She looked from one singer to the other.

“Wait, there are not projections?... Rui, what is this? Please say something... Oh...”

Unfortunately, Rui was already somewhere else mentally.

His eyes sparkled with dangerous curiosity.

“Based on the hyperrealistic presentation of the VIRTUAL SINGERS, it is highly probable that this is a virtual world.”

He began pacing.

“Yet, I do not detect any changes to my own body.”

His grin widened.

“In which case, it would seem that they possess real bodies much like my own, meaning it's not a digital world, but an analog world where they too are real.”

The excitement in his voice grew stronger with every sentence.

“If this world has such properties as to make the imaginary real, it could be an unparalleled source of inspiration!”

He pointed dramatically into the distance.

“I must research it thoroughly!”

His laughter echoed throughout the circus.

“Mwahaha!”

“Hey, Rui?” Tsukasa reached out. “Where do you think you're going?!”

Robo-Nene sighed. “Once he gets like this, there's no stopping him...”

“I'll go with him.” Yuu immediately started after Rui before the inventor could accidentally dismantle reality itself.

As the two disappeared deeper into SEKAI, KAITO turned his attention toward Tsukasa.

“It's good to see you again.”

His expression softened.

“Have you remembered your true feelings?”

Tsukasa crossed his arms.

“I already told you.”

He puffed out his chest proudly.

“The only thing I want is to become the world's top star!”

“We've come to see you today because Tsukasa is stumped and needs some hints for his performance!” Emu announced.

“Oh?” KAITO tilted his head.

“I-I'm not stumped!”

Tsukasa protested immediately.

“I just haven't quite got in character yet, that's all...”

“Would you mind showing me the script?”

After a moment of hesitation, Tsukasa handed it over.

KAITO carefully flipped through the pages.

“I see...”

His eyes stopped on a particular section.

“Tsukasa is playing the prince.”

“Yes!”

Tsukasa struck a dramatic pose.

“A courageous and wise prince among princes!”

KAITO chuckled.

“It's an awe-inspiring character, isn't it?”

He tapped his chin thoughtfully.

“I wonder how I'd play him...”

A smile appeared.

“I know!”

“Maybe I could try playing the prince.”

“You'll do that for us?!” Emu practically bounced.

“Woohoo!”

A short distance away, Miku approached a lonely figure standing near the edge of the stage.

“Hello there.”

Nene nearly jumped.

“Ah!”

Miku smiled warmly.

“Aren't you going to join the others?”

Nene awkwardly adjusted her grip on Robo-Nene's controller.

“...”

“Nice to meet you.”

Miku bowed slightly.

“I'm Miku♪”

Her eyes lit up.

“That robot is so cute.”

“Are you the one controlling it?”

“Oh...”

Nene immediately froze.

“I... Um... Uh...”

Miku blinked.

“Oh, I'm sorry!”

“Did I startle you?”

“N-No...”

Nene looked away.

“I wasn't... startled.”

Her voice became smaller.

“I... I just... don't like being seen...”

Silence followed.

Nene lowered her head.

“.....”

Miku's expression softened even further.

“Do not be embarrassed.”

She smiled.

“We can talk later if you feel ready♪”

Nene hesitated.

Then slowly nodded.

“Th-Thank you...”

As Miku walked away, Nene stared down at the controller in her hands.

(Why do I find it so hard to talk to people?)

Back near center stage, KAITO had already begun his demonstration.

“I take it upon myself to slay the demon lord!”

His voice carried confidence and nobility.

“How about this kind of delivery?”

“Ooh!”

Tsukasa and Emu stared in amazement.

“You spoke and fought like a real prince!” Emu exclaimed.

“Huh.”

Tsukasa folded his arms.

“Not... Not too shabby!”

He looked away.

“You've pointed me in the right direction at least!”

A confident grin returned to his face.

“I now know how to improve my rendition of the prince even more!”

He dramatically pointed toward the horizon.

“We're good to go now.”

“Let's head back and practice!”

At that exact moment—

“Guys!”

A familiar voice echoed across the circus.

“THIS WORLD IS INCREDIBLE!”

Everyone turned.

Rui came running toward them at full speed.

Behind him—

Yuu looked seconds away from collapsing.

“I tried... stopping... him...” he panted.

Tsukasa blinked.

“Oh, there you are, Rui. I got some new ideas for my role, so we were about to head ba—”

“Tsukasa!”

Rui interrupted dramatically.

“You won't believe this!”

He proudly held something above his head.

“I've captured a bizarre creature made of cotton.”

Tsukasa froze.

“What's more, it can talk!”

Yuu bent over, hands on his knees. “I tried... stopping... him...”

The object in Rui's grasp suddenly wriggled.

“Sob...”

A familiar voice emerged.

“Tsukasa, save me...”

The moment Tsukasa recognized it—

His soul nearly left his body.

“Yikes!”

He pointed accusingly at the plushie. “It's that creepy bunny again!”

Rui carefully examined the trembling bunny plushie dangling from his hands.

“I'd like to take it home and run some experiments,” he said thoughtfully. “I wonder what it looks like on the inside?”

The bunny immediately stiffened.

“I-I'm scared...”

“Forget it!” Tsukasa shouted, pointing dramatically at the unfortunate plushie. “Just leave it here, and let's go!”

Rui looked genuinely disappointed.

“But... I went through all that trouble catching it...”

“I caught it actually.”

Yuu raised a hand from beside him.

Rui paused.

“Ah. Right.”

Robo-Nene folded her arms.

“Don't you have enough weird stuff piled up at your place?”

“What she said!” Tsukasa immediately agreed. “Just stick with robots, okay? We're leaving!”

Miku puffed out her cheeks.

“Already? But I wanted us to do a show together!”

“I refuse!” Tsukasa declared. “I cannot afford any more distractions from my path to stardom!”

Miku tilted her head curiously.

“Hmm... And what will you do once you become a star?”

“Hm?”

Tsukasa blinked.

“Wh-What do you mean?”

He crossed his arms proudly.

“I'll perform in lots of shows, and people will crowd to see me!”

Miku smiled.

“But if you perform here, maybe you'll discover something.”

Tsukasa narrowed his eyes.

“Something wonderful.”

“Oh yeah?” he challenged. “Like what?”

Miku placed a finger against her lips.

“That's a secret☆”

“Ha!”

Tsukasa pointed accusingly at her.

“You're only saying that because you think it will convince me to join your shows!”

KAITO chuckled softly.

“It's a pity you don't want to stay, but that's your choice.”

His gaze swept across the group.

“If there's anything else you need help with, you're welcome to visit us anytime.”

A gentle smile formed on his face.

“And of course, our offer to perform together still stands.”

He looked directly at Tsukasa.

“Maybe you'll change your mind one day, and then...”

“Hm?”

Tsukasa frowned.

Before KAITO could finish—

Light suddenly exploded around them.

The circus vanished.

The colorful sky dissolved.

The brilliant glow swallowed all five of them at once.

For a brief moment, the world became pure white.

Then—

The familiar scenery of Wonder Stage returned.

Old wooden boards.

Weathered seats.

The quiet clearing hidden within Phoenix Wonderland.

Tsukasa blinked.

“And then what?”

Silence.

“Ah, never mind.”

Nearby, Emu turned toward Robo-Nene.

“Robo-Nene, are you okay?”

The robot tilted its head.

“You look sad.”

Robo-Nene stared back.

“You can tell by looking at this metal face?”

Emu nodded without hesitation.

“I don't know why, but you just FEEL sad to me!”

For a moment, Robo-Nene didn't answer.

The robot's eyes lowered slightly.

Then—

“Enough talking!”

Tsukasa clapped his hands loudly, immediately breaking the mood.

“We've got work to do!”

The days leading up to the performance passed in a whirlwind of rehearsals.

From morning until sunset, Wonder Stage echoed with voices, footsteps, laughter, and the occasional argument.

“Tsukasa,” Rui called from the director's seat. “Dynamism is the most important in the next scene. Unleash your full power! Raise your legs as high as you can!”

A moment later—

Stretching

“Urgh!”

Tsukasa's face twisted in agony.

“This split is literally going to split me! Don't fail me now, my star body!”

Across the stage, Emu was receiving singing lessons.

“You want me to teach you to sing?” Robo-Nene asked.

“Uh huh!” Emu nodded enthusiastically. “I have a strong voice but Tsukasa always complains about my singing!”

“Okay, fine.”

Emu's eyes sparkled.

“You'll teach me?! Thanks, Robo-Nene!”

She inhaled deeply.

“I'll show you what I can do so far.”

Then—

“Wonder wander yonder hoy hoy〜♪”

A brief silence followed.

Nene's voice came through the robot.

“Hehe... What on earth are you trying to sing?”

Elsewhere, the sounds of repairs echoed throughout the aging theater.

Knocking

“The seats need to be repaired so that our audience won't be distracted from our performances by squeaky, wobbly benches!” Tsukasa declared while hammering away.

Yuu crouched beside one of the rows.

“Some seats are also... damaged?”

“May I suggest rigging the seats so that they can be moved as part of the show?” Rui proposed.

Emu immediately understood.

“Ooh, I know what you mean!”

She excitedly waved her arms around.

“Like gatagatagata-pshhh! Thomp! Whap! Kaa-ching! Right? That'd be so fun♪”

“Guys,” Robo-Nene sighed, “let's keep it real...”

Yuu tried to remain composed.

For about three seconds.

“Pfft... Ahahaha~”

Even Tsukasa had to stop himself from laughing.

Little by little, Wonder Stage began to change.

The old seats were repaired.

The stage floor was reinforced.

The lighting was adjusted.

Props were finished.

And before any of them realized it—

The sun had begun to set.

Golden light painted the stage in warm colors as their final dress rehearsal came to an end.

Tsukasa stood center stage and struck a magnificent pose.

“And that's all, folks!”

He spread his arms wide.

“We hope you enjoyed our show!”

Rui closed his notebook.

“Perfect.”

A satisfied smile appeared on his face.

“Dress rehearsal was excellent.”

“Excellent is my middle name!”

Tsukasa laughed triumphantly.

“Ha ha ha ha!”

“I'm sooo excited for the actual show!” Emu cheered.

“Yeah.”

“Yeah.”

Both Robo-Nene and Yuu nodded.

“With the park mascots helping us advertise the event,” Rui said, “we should see a good number of people turn up.”

His gaze shifted toward Tsukasa.

“And Tsukasa... I didn't expect you to implement all of my stage directions.”

For once, Rui's voice sounded genuinely appreciative.

“Thank you.”

“Working with you has been a true pleasure.”

Tsukasa immediately pointed toward the sky.

“It's a bit early to be saying that!”

“We're not finished yet!”

The setting sun reflected in his eyes.

“The real show will be ten million times better than our best rehearsal!”

Rui chuckled.

“Hehe. Where are you pulling those numbers from?”

He closed his notebook.

“But yes. I'm also hoping that the public performance will turn out fabulous.”

“Oh, it will!”

Tsukasa placed both hands on his hips.

“It will be the first step on my journey towards stardom!”

“Don't you ever get tired boasting about that?” Robo-Nene asked.

“Criticism doesn't faze me!”

Tsukasa declared proudly.

“I have a good feeling about this stage.”

His gaze swept across the troupe.

“It makes my star senses tingle!”

Then he pointed dramatically at each member.

“Rui. Nene. Emu.”

“It must have been difficult for you to keep up with me, but you've done well.”

A grin appeared.

“Our show tomorrow is certain to be a smash hit!”

“I don't remember trying to keep up with you.”

Robo-Nene crossed her arms.

“...It doesn't matter.”

Her voice softened slightly.

“I hope our audience enjoys the play.”

“Tsukasa!”

“Yuu!”

The two looked over.

“Hm?”

“Hm?”

Emu clasped her hands together.

“I also wanted to thank you both!”

“For what?”

Tsukasa blinked.

“You're looking uncharacteristically serious...”

“It's unusual,” Yuu agreed.

Emu looked toward the stage.

Toward the seats.

Toward the place she loved so dearly.

“It's my dream to have people come to see a show here at this stage and love it!”

Tsukasa nodded.

“Oh yeah.”

“You've been strangely attached to this stage from the start.”

“Tsukasa...”

A bright smile spread across Emu's face.

“It looks like tomorrow my dream will come true!”

She bowed deeply.

“Thank you sooo much for making it possible!”

“No problem.”

Tsukasa immediately struck another heroic pose.

“Obviously you were unable to put on a decent show until a star such as myself showed up.”

“Hahaha!”

“His ego just keeps growing...” Robo-Nene muttered.

“Well, no harm done,” Rui said with a smile.

“Shall we call it a day?”

“We've got an early start tomorrow.”

“Yes!”

Tsukasa clapped his hands.

“Let's go home!”

“See you here tomorrow!”

“Okay!”

Emu waved enthusiastically.

“Bye bye!”

One by one, everyone began leaving Wonder Stage.

The lights dimmed.

The sky darkened.

And soon—

Only one person remained.

Nene stood alone beneath the stage lights.

Quiet.

Focused.

Determined.

“And when Prince Pegasus comes over my way,” she murmured while reviewing the script, “I turn and say my line.”

She took a breath.

“Please allow me to take care of this.”

A pause.

“Then I sing.”

Nene lowered her gaze.

“I've remembered all the steps.”

The anxiety in her voice was impossible to hide.

“But maybe I should rehearse one more time.”

“Hey.”

She froze.

Rui emerged from the shadows near the stage entrance.

“I had a feeling you'd still be here.”

“Same.”

Yuu stepped out beside him.

“Robo-Nene was fidgeting around the script so I felt like you'll rehearse alone.”

Nene's face immediately reddened.

“C-Can't I have some privacy?”

“The show's tomorrow,” Rui said gently.

“I wanted to make sure you weren't overexerting yourself.”

Nene tightened her grip on the script.

“I... have to make sure I don't make any mistakes.”

“Hehe.”

Rui smiled.

“I wouldn't want you to make mistakes either.”

He stepped onto the stage.

“So I'm offering to help.”

“I'll provide the support for both of you,” Yuu added.

For a moment, Nene simply stared at them.

Then she looked away.

“Thanks both of you.”

A small smile appeared.

“In that case... can we go over the scene where I sing to put the dragon to sleep?”

She glanced at the script again.

“I think I need to practice it a bit more.”

“Let's do it,” Rui replied.

Nene stood at center stage of the empty Wonder Stage, script clutched against her chest.

The performance was tomorrow.

Tomorrow.

Just thinking about it made her stomach twist.

She adjusted her grip on the script and took a breath.

"And when Prince Pegasus comes over my way, I turn and say my line. Please allow me to take care of this..."

Her voice echoed softly through the vacant stage.

"Then I sing..."

She paused.

"I've remembered all the steps. But maybe I should rehearse one more time."

Rui folded his arms.

"That was perfect. You have nothing to worry about."

Nene immediately shook her head.

"R-Really?"

Before Rui could answer, Yuu raised a hand from where he sat near the audience seats.

"Over perfection would lead to mistakes, so I agree."

Nene blinked.

"Huh?"

"If you keep forcing yourself to improve something that's already good, you'll start second-guessing everything."

Yuu shrugged.

"It happens."

Rui nodded in agreement.

"Indeed."

A satisfied smile crossed his face.

"I'll be going now. I have to get some rest to be ready for tomorrow's performance. Don't stay too long, Nene..."

"Maybe I should vary the tempo more in the last song..."

Yuu immediately buried his face in his hands.

"Seriously? Are you that much of a perfectionist?"

Nene looked away.

"I-I just don't want to mess up."

Silence lingered.

For once, neither Rui nor Yuu immediately replied.

The distant sound of evening music drifted from somewhere inside Phoenix Wonderland.

Children laughed.

Employees announced closing hours.

The theme park was slowly settling into the night.

After a moment, Rui stepped forward.

"Nene."

She looked up.

"You've practiced more than anyone."

Rui's voice carried none of his usual teasing.

"You've rehearsed every movement, every line, every song. If anyone has earned the right to be confident tomorrow, it's you."

Nene froze.

"..."

Yuu nodded.

"Kamishiro-senpai's right."

He stood up from the audience seats.

"When everyone else went home, you stayed."

"When everyone was taking breaks, you were practicing."

"When everyone said it was good enough, you wanted to improve it."

He smiled slightly.

"So if you're nervous, that's normal."

"But if you're worried about not being prepared?"

Yuu shook his head.

"You're probably the most prepared person in Wonderland x Showtime."

Nene stared at him.

Then quickly looked away before either of them could notice the faint redness on her face.

"...You're both exaggerating."

"Hehe."

Rui chuckled.

"We're not."

For a moment, the three simply stood there.

The stage lights above cast long shadows across the wooden floor.

Tomorrow.

The first real performance.

The first performance of Wonderland x Showtime.

The first step toward reviving Wonder Stage.

Yuu glanced toward the empty audience seats.

For an instant, a strange feeling crossed his chest.

A familiar one.

The feeling that came whenever a story reached an important turning point.

His smartwatch flickered briefly.

A tiny hologram of Glitching Miku appeared above the screen.

Only Yuu noticed.

"No anomaly?" he whispered.

She shook her head.

"None detected."

Yuu let out a quiet breath of relief.

Good.

Everything was proceeding exactly as it should.

Tsukasa had found his stage.

Emu had gathered her troupe.

Rui had joined.

Nene had returned to performing.

The four stars of Wonderland x Showtime were finally together.

The story was moving forward.

Just as it was meant to.

Yet for some reason...

Yuu found himself staring at the darkened audience seats.

A faint uneasiness settled in his chest.

As though something was waiting beyond tomorrow.

Watching.

Waiting for the curtain to rise.

"..."

The feeling vanished as quickly as it came.

"Yuu?"

Nene's voice snapped him back to reality.

"Hm?"

"Are you staying here all night?"

Yuu blinked.

Then laughed awkwardly.

"Ah. No."

Rui smiled knowingly.

"Lost in thought again?"

"Maybe."

As Nene disappeared down the path leading out of Phoenix Wonderland, silence gradually settled.

Only two people remained.

Yuu was about to leave as well when—

"Yuu-kun."

He stopped.

"Hm?"

Rui's usual smile remained on his face.

Yet somehow, it felt different.

"I have something I'd like to ask you."

Yuu tilted his head.

"What is it?"

For a moment, Rui simply looked at him.

Studying him.

The way a scientist might observe an unfamiliar phenomenon.

Then he spoke.

"What are you talking about whenever you mention... anomalies?"

...

The wind blew across the empty seats.

...

Yuu froze.

His footsteps stopped completely.

The smile on Rui's face widened ever so slightly.

"Interesting."

"..."

"That expression tells me I wasn't imagining things."

Yuu slowly turned around.

"Eh...?"

Rui chuckled.

"During rehearsals."

"During meetings."

"Even today."

His eyes narrowed slightly.

"You occasionally say things that don't quite fit the conversation."

"Things nobody else seems to notice."

The rooftop encounter flashed through Yuu's mind.

'A spectator?'

Rui had noticed back then too.

Of course he had.

This was Rui Kamishiro.

Someone who paid attention to details everyone else overlooked.

"You know things you shouldn't know."

Rui took a slow step forward.

"You knew where to find me."

"You knew Nene would stay behind to practice."

"You somehow always act as though you've already seen events before they happen."

His smile never disappeared.

But Yuu suddenly felt like he was standing in front of an interrogator.

"Almost as if..."

Rui paused.

"...you're reading from a script."

The world seemed to go silent.

Yuu's eyes widened.

Rui's gaze sharpened.

For the first time since they met, the eccentric director wasn't smiling because he found something amusing.

He was smiling because he had discovered a mystery.

And mysteries fascinated him.

"So, Yuu-kun."

Another step.

"What exactly are you?"

Chapter 85: To not intervene

Yuu found himself completely speechless.

The evening wind swept across the abandoned seats of Wonder Stage, carrying the faint scent of paint and old wood.

Rui waited patiently.

Not pushing.

Not rushing.

Simply observing.

As though watching a stage play unfold.

"...You're overthinking it, Kamishiro-senpai."

Rui chuckled.

"Am I?"

"Yes."

Yuu shrugged.

"I just happen to notice things."

"Notice things?"

"People have habits."

He pointed toward the stage.

"Emu-san always arrives first."

"Tsukasa-senpai always speaks before thinking."

"Robo-Nene (Kusanagi-san) fidgets whenever she's nervous."

Rui's smile widened.

"Interesting answer."

"But that doesn't explain everything."

Yuu felt a bead of sweat form on the back of his neck.

Rui was far more dangerous than he looked.

"You knew Nene would stay behind."

"That's not difficult."

"Really?"

"She's serious about theater."

Yuu crossed his arms.

"Anyone could guess she'd practice after rehearsal."

"Hm."

Rui seemed to consider it.

Then he laughed softly.

"Perhaps."

The tension eased slightly.

Only slightly.

Because Rui wasn't convinced.

Not entirely.

"You know..."

Rui looked up at the darkening sky.

"I've always enjoyed impossible things."

"..."

"Flying robots or Dangerous inventions."

His gaze drifted back toward Yuu.

"And people who don't fit into the story."

Yuu's heart skipped a beat.

Rui noticed.

Of course he noticed.

"Hehe."

Rui covered his mouth.

"That reaction again."

"..."

"You really are interesting, Yuu-kun."

The words sounded harmless.

Yet Yuu could feel the weight behind them.

Rui was investigating.

Slowly.

Patiently.

Like assembling pieces of a puzzle.

And if anyone in this world was capable of discovering the truth...

It was probably Rui Kamishiro.

Yuu sighed.

"Let's say there are things I can't explain."

Rui tilted his head.

"Oh?"

"And let's say knowing those things wouldn't make anyone happier."

For once, Rui fell silent.

The answer wasn't a denial.

But it wasn't a confirmation either.

A clever response.

Exactly vague enough to avoid revealing anything.

"Hehehe..."

Rui laughed again.

"I see."

"You do?"

"No."

Rui shook his head.

"Not at all."

Yuu nearly groaned.

"Then why are you smiling?"

"Because mysteries are wonderful."

The answer came instantly.

"As long as they exist, there's always something left to discover."

The rooftop conversation from weeks ago echoed in Yuu's mind.

A spectator.

Back then Rui had only suspected.

Now—

he was certain something was strange.

The problem was that he didn't know what.

Yet.

"Don't worry."

Rui suddenly turned and began walking toward the exit.

"I won't ask any more questions today."

Yuu blinked.

"...Today?"

"Of course."

Rui looked back over his shoulder.

His golden eyes gleamed beneath the evening light.

"A good mystery should be solved slowly."

Yuu immediately regretted hearing that.

"Please don't."

"Too late."

"Kamishiro-senpai."

"Hehe."

Rui waved.

"Goodnight, Yuu-kun."

With that, he disappeared down the path.

A few seconds passed.

Then his smartwatch flickered.

A small hologram appeared.

Glitching Miku.

"...That was close."

Yuu sighed deeply.

"Way too close."

"He knows something."

"Yeah."

"He'll keep investigating."

"Yeah."

The hologram folded her arms.

"What are you going to do?"

Yuu looked up at the dark sky.

Beyond the stars.

Beyond the story.

Beyond the world that wasn't supposed to exist.

Then he smiled.

A tired smile.

"Nothing."

"Huh?"

"Because if there's one person in this world who could discover the truth..."

He remembered Rui's eyes.

The curiosity hidden behind that smile. "...then stopping him would only make him more suspicious."

Glitching Miku nodded.

"Fair point."

"Besides."

"Hm?"

"The anomaly hasn't made its move yet." His expression slowly hardened. "And that's what worries me."

(To be fair, I was so close to telling him the truth and giving him his memory fragment.)

He sighed as he went straight home.

(Too bad, I'm too stubborn.)

The next morning arrived beneath clear blue skies.

Not a single cloud drifted above Phoenix Wonderland.

Perfect weather.

Perfect conditions.

And judging by the crowd gathering in front of Wonder Stage—

their first performance was already a success before it had even begun.

Tsukasa stood proudly backstage with his arms crossed.

"Clear skies, no rain forecast! The audience seats are full! We're poised for success!"

His declaration was answered by Emu's excited gasp.

"Wow! So many people came to see our show!"

Rui observed the audience from the curtains and nodded.

"Indeed. That's heartening."

Nearby, Robo-Nene stood unusually still.

Silent.

Tsukasa immediately noticed.

"Huh? Why so quiet today, robot? Don't tell me you've got stage fright?"

"D-Don't be silly..."

Her reply came a little too quickly.

Tsukasa smirked.

"Listen, everyone's eyes will be on me! No one's going to bother paying attention to some weird robot, so you need not worry about messing up! Ha ha ha!"

"Tsk."

Robo-Nene looked away.

Yuu chuckled.

"I think that might just be his way of encouraging you."

"No, I'm sure he totally believes it."

Before Tsukasa could object, Emu raised both hands into the air.

"Let's put on an amazing show today! One, two... We can do wonders, wonderhoy☆"

"Wonderhoy!"

Rui, Yuu, and Robo-Nene answered together.

Tsukasa visibly winced.

"Guys, my energy levels dropped just hearing that!"

He stepped forward dramatically and pointed toward the stage.

"Watch me, this is how you do it! Wonderlands×Showtime, it's time to raise the curtain!"

The audience erupted into applause.

And the show began.

The curtains opened.

Prince Pegasus stepped onto the stage with all the grandeur Tsukasa could muster.

"I must set off with my trusty sword to slay the dastardly demon lord♪ Well, if it isn't Ne-Ne the Cyborgian! Perhaps she would join me on my treacherous journey?"

From the opposite side of the stage, Robo-Nene appeared.

"Your Highness, you have restored peace to our village, which had long been troubled by monsters. I bring you a Hyper Drink, my tribe's famous revitalizing potion, as a token of our gratitude."

"A gift for me, how splendid!"

Tsukasa accepted the prop cup.

"Based on its slimy, disgusting appearance, it must be highly effective. I shall drink it at once!"

He dramatically tilted the cup.

"Glug, glug, glug..."

Then immediately recoiled.

"Blah! What is this?! Oh, how could I have not realized... The Cyborgians only drink oil!"

Laughter spread through the audience.

Children giggled.

Parents smiled.

Even some staff members laughed.

Backstage, Emu nearly bounced out of excitement.

"Rui! Yuu! We made the audience laugh!"

"Indeed. "We're off to a good start. Get ready, Yuu, Emu. You both and the mascots are next."

The mascot performers quickly took their positions.

"Everybody, get in position!"

The dragon costume rustled as performers climbed inside.

Moments later, a massive dragon burst onto the stage.

Children immediately pointed.

"Wow! It's a big dragon!"

Rui folded his arms.

"It's just a repurposed dragon dance costume, but it appears sufficiently lifelike when the actors inside move in tandem."

Emu jumped into view.

"I'm Emumu, the demon lord's dragon keeper! My dragon will pancake you, foolish prince!"

Yuu stepped onto the stage shortly after.

"I'm Yuumu! I'm here to witness the defeat of the prince and relay the news to the demon lord!"

"Curses!" Tsukasa shouted. "How am I supposed to fight a dragon this enormous?!"

"Give it up, Prince!"

The audience laughed again.

Everything was working.

Everything was flowing perfectly.

Backstage, Rui nodded in satisfaction.

"It's going well."

His eyes shifted toward Robo-Nene.

"Nene's solo part is coming up next."

Inside the robot, Nene swallowed nervously.

Her fingers tightened around the controller.

(I've been terrified of performing on stage ever since... that happened.)

The cheers of the audience reached her ears.

(But if this goes well...)

Her breathing steadied.

(Maybe I can overcome that fear...)

On stage, Tsukasa pointed dramatically at the dragon.

"Ah, I see! This dragon can be lulled to sleep with a song! I must think of some song to sing..."

"Your Highness."

Ne-Ne stepped forward.

"Please allow me to take care of this. I shall sing to the dragon."

Nene closed her eyes.

(I... I can do this!)

Then she began to sing.

The melody flowed across Wonder Stage.

Gentle.

Beautiful.

Pure.

The audience fell silent.

Even the children stopped moving.

"Ooh, the song's so pretty!"

The dragon slowly lowered its head.

Tsukasa smiled.

"Splendid! The dragon is falling into a deep slumber!"

(With this...)

His fingers clenched slightly.

(The robot battery should be drained...)

A faint feeling of guilt settled in his chest.

(I'm sorry.)

The story had to continue.

The flow couldn't be broken.

(But I'll try to minimize it.)

The song continued.

The audience remained captivated.

Then—

"————♪....."

A sharp screech suddenly echoed across the stage.

SKREEEEEEEE—!

Microphone feedback exploded from the speakers.

Nene froze.

"Huh?"

Her fingers moved frantically across the controls.

"The mic's not working?"

The robot didn't respond.

"I... I can't move the robot at all!"

Panic entered her voice.

"What's happening?!"

Rui's eyes widened.

"The robot stopped moving?!"

A second later—

Power Off.

The lights in Robo-Nene's eyes vanished.

The moment the robot shut down, the atmosphere on stage changed.

The laughter from earlier faded.

The audience watched in confusion.

Tsukasa's eyes widened beneath his prince costume.

"Wha..."

Inside the control booth, Nene desperately pressed buttons on the controller.

"Why? Why won't it move?"

Rui immediately checked the monitor connected to the robot.

His expression darkened.

"The battery must be flat. Just how long did we stay rehearsing to the point that we forgot the battery!"

For a brief moment, panic swept through the backstage area.

Tsukasa's mind raced.

(Why did it freeze up all of a sudden?! Is it broken?)

His gaze darted between the motionless robot and the waiting audience.

(What do we do now?)

The next scene depended on Nene.

Without her song, the dragon wouldn't fall asleep.

Without the dragon falling asleep—

the entire script collapsed.

(I can't do the scene where I defeat the dragon if she doesn't finish singing to put it to sleep!)

Then Tsukasa took a deep breath.

The future star stepped forward.

Improvising.

"Ne-Ne, what's the matter?"

His voice rang across Wonder Stage.

"It seems your song made you fall asleep before the dragon did!"

A few children giggled.

Tsukasa pointed dramatically toward the audience.

"I need you to sing just a little longer!"

Then he smiled.

"Perhaps Ne-Ne needs some encouragement from our wonderful audience!"

He raised both hands.

"Can you please help us?"

The audience immediately responded.

"Ne-Ne! You can do it!"

"Come on!"

"You got this!"

Tsukasa clenched his fist.

(This will buy us some time...)

His smile remained flawless.

(Nene, Rui...)

His eyes briefly shifted toward the wings.

(You've got to come up with something so that the show can go on!!)

Nene stared helplessly at the controller.

"Uh..."

The cheers only made her more nervous.

"Um..."

Her hands trembled.

"Wh-What can I do..."

On stage, Tsukasa continued.

"Ne-Ne, you can do it!"

His voice carried genuine desperation now.

"Please, Ne-Ne..."

Emu instantly caught on.

"Eek!"

She jumped backward dramatically.

"The loud cheering is confusing my dragon!"

Yuu followed immediately.

"The hope from them is too powerful!"

He pointed toward the audience.

"It's starting to weaken us!"

Tsukasa nearly sighed in relief.

(Oh!)

A smile flashed across his face.

(Nice ad-lib, Yuu. Emu!)

(With this setup, we can proceed to me defeating the dragon without it being put to sleep!)

He raised his sword.

"Thank you, dear audience!"

The children cheered.

"Now that the dragon is stunned, I shall make short work of it!"

Then—

"Oh..."

Nene's voice escaped her lips.

A horrible feeling ran down her spine.

The robot tilted.

The massive machine swayed.

Tsukasa turned.

"What the—"

The robot lost balance completely.

"Argh!"

THUD.

The audience gasped.

Dust rose from the stage.

The giant robot had fallen directly onto Prince Pegasus.

"Huh?!"

One child pointed.

"Ne-Ne has fallen over, crushing the prince!"

Rui immediately rushed forward.

"This is disastrous!" His eyes darted across the malfunctioning systems. "The autonomous control system has failed!"

"Oh no..." Nene's face went pale.

"No, no, no..." Emu panicked. "Yiiikes!"

"H-Help! We must save him!"

Beneath the robot, Tsukasa's voice echoed dramatically.

"N-No..."

A hand emerged from underneath.

"I can still fight!"

The audience stared.

Some laughed.

Some looked confused.

Tsukasa forced himself upright.

"I can't fall in battle..."

He struggled against the prop.

"...until I defeat the dragon!"

His voice cracked slightly.

"I can't lose now and disappoint all the children who believe in me!"

For a brief moment—the audience actually cheered.

But Rui knew the truth.

The play was falling apart.

"Tsukasa..." His voice lowered. "I'm sorry, but I can't let this continue."

Yuu stood frozen.

His heart felt strangely heavy.

Something wasn't right.

The scene was unfolding exactly as it should.

Exactly as the story demanded.

The robot failed.

The performance collapsed.

The audience left disappointed.

Everything was proceeding according to the flow.

And yet—

why did it feel wrong?

Yuu's eyes moved from person to person.

Rui.

Emu.

Tsukasa.

Nene.

(In the end...)

His fists tightened.

(Will I intervene as it is?)

The question echoed inside his mind.

(What should I do...?)

His heartbeat grew louder.

(What's the right thing?)

...

...

No answer came.

The silence stretched.

Then Rui stepped onto the stage.

His calm voice carried throughout Wonder Stage.

"Prince Pegasus befriended the dragon and its keeper."

The audience looked confused.

Rui continued anyway.

"His journey was to continue for a long, long time..."

He looked toward the horizon.

"...before he would finally cross swords with the demon lord."

Tsukasa's eyes widened.

"What?!"

The curtain slowly began to close.

A disappointed murmur spread throughout the audience.

One child frowned.

"What happened next?"

Another crossed his arms.

"Is it really over? That's boring!"

"The prince had to be rescued by the bad guys?"

A boy shook his head.

"What a wimp!"

Nearby, parents exchanged awkward looks.

"That was a confusing play..."

"It started well..."

A father sighed.

"But then it became unwatchable."

"Let's go and check out something else."

The words struck harder than any weapon.

Tsukasa froze.

"Gasp!"

One family stood up.

Then another.

And another.

Rows of seats slowly began to empty.

The applause was gone.

The laughter was gone.

Only disappointed conversations remained.

One by one, the audience started leaving.

The backstage area felt painfully quiet after the audience had gone.

Only moments ago, the Wonder Stage had been filled with laughter, applause, and excitement.

Now, all that remained was silence.

The silence of failure.

Tsukasa stood with his arms crossed, staring at the floor.

Then Tsukasa finally spoke.

"So, you're the real Nene who was controlling that robot?"

Nene flinched.

She lowered her head.

"....."

Emu immediately stepped forward.

"Nene... It's okay, no need to feel bad."

Nene's shoulders trembled.

Rui adjusted the robot's controls.

"I recharged the robot. It's fully operational again."

The statement only seemed to make Tsukasa angrier.

His fists clenched.

".....You forgot to charge it..."

His voice shook.

"I can't believe my show was ruined all because of such a stupid mistake!"

Nene's eyes widened.

"I'm...sorry..."

"I don't need apologies!"

The words struck like a slap.

Nene visibly recoiled.

Rui frowned.

"Tsukasa, it's not like Nene did it on purpose."

His voice remained calm.

"After you two left yesterday, Yuu, Nene and I rehearsed until late. It's partially my fault too. I forgot to check the battery before the show. Next time, I'll make sure—"

"Next time?"

Tsukasa cut him off sharply.

"And what about today's audience?!"

His voice echoed through the empty stage.

"There's a different show every day. Each time we perform, we're battling to win over the hearts of the audience."

His gaze swept across everyone.

"That's why we must succeed each and every time!"

His hands shook.

"Didn't you all want to make today's show a success?!"

The frustration he'd been holding back finally spilled over.

"Or are you going to tell me you didn't care?!"

Nobody answered.

Rui remained silent.

Yuu finally stepped forward.

"Calm down, Tsukasa-senpai."

Tsukasa immediately turned toward him.

"You expect me to calm down after what happened?!"

"Yeah."

Yuu met his eyes.

"You're letting your emotions control over you."

For a moment, Tsukasa looked like he wanted to argue.

Before he could, Nene spoke.

A tiny voice.

Barely above a whisper.

"It's... It's all my fault..."

She clenched her hands.

"It's because I was...too scared to perform in person."

Her voice cracked.

"I shouldn't have relied on a robot..."

Rui looked toward her.

"Nene..."

Tsukasa's expression hardened.

"So you admit it?!"

Everyone froze.

"I should've known there was something wrong with you."

Nene's eyes widened.

"Staying hidden and only talking to us through a robot!"

Each word landed harder than the last.

"So you're a shy girl? Not good with public performances?"

Nene took a step back.

"You think that's an excuse?!"

"!!"

"If you can't even face your audience, how can you put on a good show?!"

Nene's face went pale.

Her lips trembled.

Then—

"...sorry..."

Her voice broke.

"I'm s-sorry!"

She turned and ran.

Footsteps echoed through the stage.

"Nene!"

Rui.

"Nene!"

Emu.

"Nene!"

Yuu.

All three called after her.

Tsukasa remained where he stood.

Motionless.

Rui took a step forward to chase after Nene.

Then stopped.

Slowly, he turned around.

His eyes met Tsukasa's.

For the first time since they met, there was no amusement in Rui's expression.

No smile.

No laughter.

Only disappointment.

"Don't you think you went too far?"

The question struck harder than any shout.

Tsukasa stiffened.

"You're right that it's impossible to do great shows when one of the actors can't face the audience."

Rui's voice remained calm.

"But you seem to be forgetting about something even more basic."

A brief silence followed.

"You can't stage great shows alone, either."

Tsukasa's eyes widened.

"!!"

Rui continued.

"Maybe I'm a hypocrite."

He looked away briefly.

"I've been performing solo for a long time, after all."

Then he looked back.

"But since joining this troupe, it's become clearer to me than ever before how much more interesting shows become when you work together."

His gaze sharpened.

"Fellow performers should be valued."

Tsukasa looked away.

Unable to answer.

"What are you trying to achieve picking on your colleague who is already feeling terribly guilty over what happened?"

Rui shook his head.

"I'm disappointed to see that you don't seem to have a true passion for theater after all."

"No!"

Tsukasa's voice echoed immediately.

"You're wrong!"

He stepped forward.

"I put my heart and soul into making our show the best it could be!"

His fists tightened.

"I've always given my all to performances!"

His voice trembled.

"Always trying my best to one day achieve stardom!"

Rui stared at him.

"To achieve stardom, you say?"

A bitter smile appeared.

"Hmph."

Then—

"That's all you care about?"

Tsukasa froze.

"So I'm right then."

Rui turned away.

"To you, theater is just a means of achieving some selfish, personal goal."

"Wait..."

Tsukasa reached out.

"How can you say that..."

Rui didn't stop.

"I won't be coming here anymore."

The words felt like a punch.

"Huh..."

"Oh, and by the way..."

Rui glanced over his shoulder.

"You don't have what it takes to become a star."

Time seemed to stop.

Tsukasa's eyes widened.

"!!"

His voice cracked.

"Why?"

The question came out weaker than expected.

"Why do you think I don't have what it takes?!"

Rui didn't answer.

He simply walked away.

Footsteps gradually faded into the distance.

"Rui, don't go!"

Emu ran after him.

But he never turned back.

The stage became quiet once more.

Tsukasa stood alone.

Staring at nothing.

Then Emu turned toward him.

Her eyes were already beginning to water.

"Tsukasa, w-wait!"

He didn't respond.

Emu forced a smile.

"I just wanted to say I had lots of fun today!"

Her voice shook.

"I really enjoyed performing in front of an audience!"

She clasped her hands together.

"That's why..."

"I want to try again!"

Tears began forming in her eyes.

"Next time everything will go just fine!"

Tsukasa remained silent.

Emu's smile slowly faltered.

"Didn't you like being in the show?"

A long pause followed.

Then—

"With how it went?"

Tsukasa clenched his fists.

"NO!"

He turned.

And walked away.

Fast.

Without looking back.

"Tsukasa!"

Emu called after him.

But he never stopped.

His footsteps disappeared into the distance.

The Wonder Stage grew quiet once again.

Emu stood frozen.

The tears she'd been holding back finally spilled over.

"Tsukasa..."

Her voice trembled.

"What now..." She looked around the empty stage.

The empty seats.

The abandoned props.

The broken atmosphere.

"No one is smiling anymore..."

Slowly, she turned toward Yuu.

Her eyes were red.

Filled with confusion.

Fear.

Sadness.

"What should we do, Yuu..?!"

Yuu had been watching everything in silence.

Watching the troupe fall apart.

Watching the story unfold exactly as he remembered.

Slowly, he walked toward her.

Without saying a word.

Without trying to force an answer.

He simply wrapped his arms around her.

Gently.

His hand brushed through her hair.

Emu's eyes widened.

Then the tears came all at once.

She buried her face against him and cried.

The cheerful smile that had always been on her face was gone.

And Yuu could only hold her.

His gaze drifted toward the stage.

Toward the place where Tsukasa had stood.

Where Rui had walked away.

Where Nene had run.

(So this is why my heart felt uneasy...)

Chapter 86: Plot Twist

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

Now, everyone was gone.

The dream they had all worked so hard for had fallen apart before their eyes.

No...

I can change things.

Yuu slowly closed his eyes.

I'm sure that there will be an anomaly sooner or later...

If the story continued exactly as it was supposed to, then everything would proceed toward the future he already knew.

But maybe...

Just maybe...

He could alter one small piece.

"Emu..."

His voice was soft.

Emu looked up, tears still clinging to the corners of her eyes.

"...Yuu...?"

The sadness in her voice made his chest tighten.

Yuu hesitated.

Then he slowly opened his hand.

A faint golden light emerged from his palm.

Tiny particles drifted through the air like glowing fireflies.

Emu's eyes widened.

"Whaaa...?"

Suspended above Yuu's hand was a small crystal fragment.

Unlike ordinary crystals, it pulsed gently with warmth.

Almost as if it were alive.

"I'll be giving you your memory fragment temporarily..."

Emu blinked.

"My... memory fragment?"

Yuu nodded.

"It's something important."

The fragment floated upward.

Then slowly drifted toward Emu.

The moment it touched her chest—

A brilliant light burst forth.

"Eh...?"

Emu staggered.

Memories.

Feelings.

Voices.

A promise.

A stage filled with smiles.

A younger version of herself running through Phoenix Wonderland.

The warmth of countless happy faces.

The dream she had carried ever since she was a child.

Her eyes widened.

"...Ah..."

Tears began falling again.

But these were different.

Not tears of sadness.

"I remember..."

he fragment's lingering light still shimmered faintly around her.

"There isn't enough time for sadness, Emu..."

Emu blinked.

For a moment, she stared at him.

Then slowly—

The familiar brightness returned to her eyes.

"...Yeah!"

She clenched her fists. "We have to get Tsukasa, Nene, and Rui!"

Yuu nodded. "Exactly."

Emu quickly wiped her tears away.

"Wonderhoy mission!"

She suddenly pointed dramatically into the distance.

"Operation Save Wonderlands×Showtime begins now!"

Yuu couldn't help but chuckle.

"...That's a long operation name."

"But it sounds cool!"

"It does."

For the first time since the failed performance, Emu smiled again.

And that alone made Yuu feel that giving her the fragment had been the right choice.

"First, Tsukasa!"

"Tsukasa-senpai? Hmm... No, we don't need to save him as he will discover his own feelings."

Emu blinked.

"He will?"

"Yeah."

Yuu glanced toward the distant horizon.

His voice was unusually confident.

"Sometimes people need to get lost before they can find the answer they're looking for."

By now, he should be in Wonderland SEKAI later...

"How about this, Emu..."

She looked up expectantly.

"You find Nene."

Emu nodded immediately.

"And I'll go find Kamishiro-senpai."

For a brief moment, Emu looked uncertain.

"...You'll be okay by yourself?"

Yuu gave a reassuring smile.

"Yeah."

Rui was the one person he was most worried about.

Unlike Tsukasa, who confronted his emotions head-on...

Rui hid his.

If left alone, he would simply bury everything beneath another smile.

"I'll bring him back."

Emu's eyes sparkled with determination.

"Okay! You can count on me!"

Yuu raised a fist.

"Yeah...!"

Emu bumped her fist against his with an energetic grin.

"Wonderhoy!"

The two exchanged one last nod before sprinting in opposite directions.

Yuu, meanwhile, headed toward Kamiyama High School.

The evening breeze swept past him as he ran.

His smartwatch flickered.

The holographic image of the Glitching Miku appeared beside him once more.

"So... you're finally changing the story."

Yuu kept running.

"...Only where I have to."

"And if everything collapses?"

Yuu's gaze remained fixed ahead.

"Then I'll take responsibility."

The hologram smiled.

"A spectator becoming an actor..."

"..."

"...This should be interesting."

Meanwhile...

Changing Perspective to Rui Kamishiro

The evening sky had already begun to darken.

Orange faded into violet as Rui walked alone through the streets, one hand tucked into his pocket while the other absentmindedly spun a small screwdriver between his fingers.

His footsteps echoed quietly against the pavement.

"..."

The bustling sounds of the city surrounded him, yet they felt strangely distant.

His mind refused to leave Wonder Stage.

Rui sighed softly.

"...Perhaps I was too harsh."

His smile returned almost automatically.

The same carefree smile everyone knew.

"...No."

He shook his head.

"Someone had to say it."

His pace slowed.

"...But..."

He looked toward his own reflection in a shop window.

"...Was I saying it for Nene..."

His golden eyes narrowed.

"...or for myself?"

The evening breeze gently rustled the trees as Rui walked along the quiet street, his hands tucked into his pockets. The orange glow of sunset stretched across the city, painting long shadows over the sidewalk.

"Hey, Kamishiro-senpai."

The familiar voice caught him by surprise.

Rui stopped in his tracks and turned around.

Standing a few meters behind him was Yuu.

A faint smile crossed Rui's lips.

"Oh? If it isn't Yuu. It's late. What are you doing?"

Yuu shrugged lightly.

"I could say the same thing."

Rui let out a quiet chuckle.

"If you want to persuade me to come back, it's useless."

"I didn't say a thing..." Yuu replied calmly. "...But... I want to tell you a story. Do you mind hearing it?"

"Hmm..."

Rui tapped his chin thoughtfully before pointing toward a nearby vending machine.

"Sure... but since it's a story, buy me a drink at least."

Yuu sighed.

"...I knew you'd say that."

Without another complaint, he walked over to the vending machine, inserted a few coins, and bought two canned drinks.

Rui accepted his with a satisfied smile.

"Much appreciated."

A few minutes later, the two found themselves at a quiet neighborhood park.

Neither chose the benches.

Instead, they sat side by side on the swings, gently rocking back and forth beneath the fading evening sky.

The silence between them wasn't uncomfortable.

It simply gave the story room to begin.

Rui took a sip of his drink before glancing sideways.

"So?"

He smiled with genuine curiosity.

"Is this story going to be an interesting one?"

"Of course it is..."

Yuu looked toward the darkening sky.

"Well... maybe it won't be as interesting."

A small smile appeared on his face.

"This story is about a lonely alchemist."

Rui's swing slowed.

"...The one I didn't continue."

"I was planning on continuing it tomorrow by putting on another show..." Rui admitted quietly.

"...But..."

He looked at Yuu.

"I want to hear your version."

Yuu nodded.

"Sure."

He inhaled slowly before beginning.

"Once, in a quiet village, there lived an alchemist unlike anyone else."

"He possessed incredible knowledge and could create marvelous wonders that seemed almost like magic."

"Yet because his abilities were so unusual, the townspeople feared him."

"They whispered rumors about him."

"They kept their distance."

"As a result..."

"The alchemist spent his days alone."

The playground fell silent except for the rhythmic creaking of the swings.

"One day, a traveling theater troupe visited the village."

"The alchemist watched their performance from afar."

"He saw the smiles on the audience's faces."

"The laughter of children."

"The joy the actors spread wherever they went."

Yuu's voice softened.

"For the first time..."

"He found something he wanted more than his research."

A small smile appeared.

"I want to create something that makes people smile."

Rui unconsciously tightened his grip around the can in his hand.

Yuu continued.

"Inspired, the alchemist began performing his own shows."

"At first..."

"The townspeople loved them."

"His inventions amazed everyone."

"Children gathered to watch him."

"He lived happily..."

Yuu paused.

"...but not ever after."

Rui's smile slowly faded.

"The townsfolk told the alchemist they wanted to take part in his shows."

"At first, the alchemist was overjoyed by their request."

"However..."

"Each of his ideas was met with ridicule."

"One after another..."

"The townsfolk began to avoid him."

The swing beneath Rui gradually came to a stop.

Yuu looked down at the sand below his feet.

"But we must not blame either the alchemist for his odd ideas..."

"...nor the townsfolk for their lack of understanding."

"They simply had different ways of thinking."

He allowed those words to linger.

Then quietly finished—

"Unfortunately..."

"In the end..."

"None of the townsfolk wanted anything to do with the alchemist."

"And he..."

"...was left all alone once again."

Silence settled over the playground.

Only the distant hum of traffic and the faint chirping of evening cicadas filled the air.

Rui didn't speak.

His gaze remained fixed on the ground beneath the swing.

The story had ended.

The silence lingered after Yuu finished his story.

Rui remained seated on the swing, gently rocking back and forth as he stared at the empty playground before him.

"...I see."

A faint smile returned to his face.

"So that's your version."

He tilted his head ever so slightly, carefully studying Yuu's expression.

"It feels like you've heard it already."

Yuu didn't answer.

Rui's smile widened.

"...Don't tell me."

His golden eyes sparkled with mischief.

"Are you from the future? No..."

He tapped his chin.

"The past?"

Then he laughed softly.

"Are you a time traveler?"

Yuu could only sigh.

"How could you say that..."

He shook his head.

"I'm just a normal guy who wants to live by his own life."

"Pfft..."

Rui covered his mouth before a laugh escaped.

"Ahahaha..."

"You say that..."

"...yet you look like you've been fixing things all around you."

Yuu lowered his gaze.

"..."

Then, after a brief silence—

"Kamishiro-senpai..."

"I'm not asking you to come back."

"If that's what you want..."

"...then go ahead."

"It's your choice."

With that, Yuu stood up from the swing.

The chains creaked softly behind him.

"But..."

He turned slightly.

"Think about the lonely alchemist."

His voice was calm.

"Would that be the right choice for a happy ending?"

Rui fell silent.

"..."

"So in the end..."

A small smile appeared on his face.

"You're trying to persuade me into coming back to the troupe?"

Yuu chuckled.

"Silly me..."

He shook his head.

"I'm not going to do that."

Rui blinked.

"What do you mean?"

Just then—

Rustle.

Rustle.

Three figures stepped out from the dimly lit park path.

Rui instinctively turned.

"..."

Emu.

Nene.

Tsukasa.

The three surrounded the two of them before Rui even realized what was happening.

Yuu smiled faintly.

"Emu..."

"You worked fast."

"I didn't expect you to do it this quickly."

Emu proudly puffed out her chest.

"Hehe~"

"Thanks to you, Yuu!"

Rui looked around before letting out an amused sigh.

"...What is this?"

"An ambush?"

He smiled.

"I'm sorry..."

"But I'm not changing my mind."

Tsukasa stepped forward.

"I need to show you something."

Rui folded his arms.

"Whatever it is..."

"It won't make a difference."

"Like I said..."

"I don't want to stage shows with you ever agai—"

Before he could finish—

Emu suddenly wrapped both arms around him.

"Now!"

"I got him!"

"Wha—"

Almost immediately, Nene hurried over and grabbed onto his other arm.

"Uh..."

"Here!"

Rui looked between the two girls in complete confusion.

"What are you doing, Emu?"

"And you too, Nene?!"

"Do it, Tsukasa!" Emu shouted.

Tsukasa nodded confidently.

"Good job!"

He stepped directly in front of Rui.

"Rui..."

His expression became unusually serious.

"I'm going to show you..."

"...my true feelings!"

At that exact moment—

A familiar melody echoed through the park.

A song without lyrics.

A song that connected hearts.

Untitled.

Light erupted beneath their feet.

Golden particles spiraled upward like countless shooting stars.

"Wha—"

Before Rui could react—

The four figures were swallowed by the brilliant light.

In the next instant—

They vanished.

Silence returned to the park.

Only one person remained standing beneath the evening sky.

Yuu.

He quietly watched the fading light disappear into the air.

"...Now that's done."

He exhaled softly.

"...I didn't expect the anomaly to show up."

Yuu slowly turned around.

Standing several meters away beneath the shadow of an old tree was an elderly gentleman dressed in an elegant suit.

His sharp gaze never left Yuu.

The president of Phoenix Wonderland.

"Nice to meet you, Ootori Kounosuke." A faint smile appeared on his face.

"I didn't expect you to be the one stopping Wonderlands×Showtime, though."

Chapter End Notes

Woah! Wonderhoy! I guess I turned Emu's father into a villain? Nah.. This is just the confrontation between Yuu and him

Chapter 87: Climax

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

The old man's expression remained unreadable.

The evening wind swept quietly through the empty park, rustling the leaves overhead. The playground, which only moments ago had been filled with conversation, now felt eerily still.

Before either of them could speak—

Yuu's smartwatch flickered.

Static rippled across its holographic display before the familiar image of the Glitching Miku appeared.

"Yuu... what do you mean?"

Her turquoise eyes darted between Yuu and the elderly man standing before him.

Yuu didn't answer immediately.

Instead, his gaze remained fixed on the man.

"Ootori Kounosuke..."

One of the owners of Phoenix Wonderland.

The man who had devoted decades of his life to preserving the park.

The man who loved his family more than anything.

And—

The man standing directly in the way of Wonderlands×Showtime's future.

Kounosuke folded his arms.

"So..."

"You seem to know who I am."

"I do."

"And yet you speak as though I am some sort of villain."

His voice wasn't angry.

It was calm.

Measured.

Like someone discussing business rather than arguing.

"You said I was stopping Wonderlands×Showtime."

"...Why?"

Yuu met his eyes without wavering.

"Because you are."

Silence.

"You know Emu wants to save Wonder Stage."

"..."

"You know she's trying harder than anyone."

"..."

"And yet..."

"You continue to oppose her."

Kounosuke let out a slow breath.

"Young man, I oppose her because she is still a child."

His eyes softened ever so slightly.

"If you know that much... then you should also know why."

"The stage has been losing visitors for years."

"I've watched countless performances fail."

"I've watched employees lose hope."

"I've watched dreams disappear."

His voice remained steady.

"There comes a point where sentiment is no longer enough. The park must survive. If keeping one old stage means risking the future of Phoenix Wonderland...then I cannot allow it."

He looked directly at Yuu.

"If you understand all this..."

"...why didn't you stop Emu?"

Yuu's eyes widened slightly.

Kounosuke continued.

"Thinking she can handle that stage...thinking she can carry its future..."

"...She's still a child."

The question struck deeper than Yuu expected.

...

But I didn't expect him to be like that.

I thought he'd give me despair despite being the anomaly of this story.

Instead...

He's simply a grandfather trying to protect his family.

Yuu slowly closed his eyes.

Then there's only one way.

He opened them again.

"...Mr. Kounosuke."

For the first time since they met—

Yuu bowed his head.

Not out of fear.

Not out of obligation.

But out of respect.

"I have a favor to ask of you."

The old man remained silent.

"I won't ask you to believe in Wonderlands×Showtime."

"I won't ask you to change your decision today."

Yuu slowly raised his head.

"...I'm only asking you to watch."

Kounosuke's brows narrowed.

"Watch?"

"Just one performance."

"Watch until the curtain falls."

"If, after seeing everything they have to offer...you still believe Wonder Stage should disappear..."

Yuu smiled faintly. "...then I won't stop you."

That reminded him of someone.

"...Very well."

His answer came at last.

"I'll watch."

"But only because you asked."

Yuu let out the breath he hadn't realized he was holding.

"Thank you."

"...What's your name?"

For the first time since they met, Ootori Kounosuke's stern gaze softened ever so slightly. He no longer looked at Yuu as an obstacle, but as a young man standing firmly behind his convictions.

The holographic image of Glitching Miku quietly observed from Yuu's smartwatch, saying nothing.

Yuu smiled faintly.

"My name..."

He placed a hand over his chest.

"Hazuki Yuu."

The old man repeated it under his breath.

"...Hazuki Yuu."

Yuu nodded.

"I'm just an ordinary first-year student."

He let out a quiet laugh.

"At least... that's what I'd like to believe."

Kounosuke narrowed his eyes.

"Somehow..."

"You don't seem ordinary."

Yuu scratched the back of his head awkwardly.

"I hear that a lot."

The old man studied him for another long moment.

"...Very well, Hazuki Yuu."

"I'll remember your name."

Yuu bowed politely.

"Thank you."

Kounosuke turned toward the path leading back to Phoenix Wonderland.

"I'll keep my promise."

"I'll watch their performance until the curtain falls." His footsteps echoed softly as he began walking away.

Just before disappearing into the darkness, he spoke one last time without turning around. "...Don't disappoint me."

Yuu watched him leave until his figure disappeared beyond the trees.

Only then did he exhale.

"That went better than I expected."

The Glitching Miku floated beside him, arms folded with an amused smile.

"You've changed another person's path."

Yuu looked down at his hands.

"I only gave him another reason to watch." He closed his fingers into a gentle fist. "The rest...belongs to Wonderlands×Showtime."

Yuu remained standing in the middle of the quiet park long after Ootori Kounosuke had disappeared into the night.

The cool breeze brushed against his face as he gazed toward the distant lights of Phoenix Wonderland.

"..."

For some reason...

"...It was easier than I expected."

His voice was barely above a whisper.

The glitching hologram beside his smartwatch tilted her head.

"You were expecting something else?"

Yuu nodded.

"I thought he'd be more... difficult."

"I expected resistance."

"Arguments."

"Maybe even despair."

His eyes narrowed thoughtfully.

"But instead..."

"He simply listened."

The Glitching Miku crossed her arms.

"That's because he isn't a bad person."

Yuu smiled faintly.

"I know."

"He loves Phoenix Wonderland."

"He loves his family."

"And..."

"He loves Emu."

He lowered his gaze.

"That's why he became an anomaly."

"...His wish to protect everyone became too strong."

Silence settled between them.

Yuu slowly looked toward the night sky.

"...Which makes this even stranger."

"Hm?"

"If solving this was this easy..."

"...then something else must be happening."

A chill ran down his spine.

The uneasy feeling he'd carried since arriving in Wonderland SEKAI hadn't disappeared.

It had only grown quieter.

Like the calm before a storm.

"..."

"I wonder..."

His golden eyes reflected the distant amusement park lights.

"...what's going on with Tsukasa-senpai and the others?"

The Glitching Miku followed his gaze.

"Do you think they'll be alright?"

Yuu smiled.

"They're with Wonderland SEKAI's Miku and KAITO."

"...So they'll probably be fine."

He paused.

"...Probably."

The Glitching Miku giggled.

"'Probably' doesn't sound very reassuring."

"It isn't."

Yuu let out a helpless laugh."Whenever Tsukasa-senpai, Emu, Rui-senpai, and Nene are together, something unbelievable always happens."

Meanwhile, from Tsukasa, Emu, Nene, and Rui's point of view.

Wonderland SEKAI

A brilliant pillar of light descended upon the colorful stage.

When the radiance faded, Rui slowly opened his eyes.

"...You brought me here again?"

The whimsical world of Wonderland SEKAI stretched before him, brighter than ever beneath a sky painted with impossible colors.

Miku skipped onto the stage with her usual cheerful smile.

"Hello, everyone! Tonight we have a special performance guaranteed to put a smile on your face.♪"

Beside her, KAITO stepped forward with a graceful bow.

"Are you ready to put on a good show for the audience?"

Tsukasa puffed out his chest confidently.

"I couldn't be more ready!"

A burst of microphone feedback echoed through the theater.

The stage lights dimmed.

The curtains slowly rose.

Miku's gentle narration filled the entire Wonderland.

"Once upon a time, there was an eccentric traveling theater troupe♪"

The scenery transformed into a beautiful forest.

"There was an attention-craving showman..."

Tsukasa appeared beneath the spotlight.

"...a stubborn clown..."

Emu spun happily across the stage.

"...and a songstress too shy to sing in front of people!"

Nene quietly lowered her head.

"The oddball group staged many shows, but they never managed to attract an audience."

The empty seats surrounding them emphasized the loneliness of their performances.

"Then one day, as they were traveling through a forest..."

A lone figure appeared beneath a large tree.

"...they encountered an alchemist who was performing a show all alone."

Rui looked up.

On stage—

He saw himself.

The Alchemist stood surrounded by strange inventions and mechanical puppets, performing before an audience that existed only in his imagination.

The Troupe Leader stepped forward.

"What an incredible performance? If you joined us, our troupe would make a name for itself at last!"

The Alchemist slowly turned.

"Who are you?"

"I am a showman, and I could use your help to put on wonderful shows!"

Tsukasa's voice rang with determination.

"I promise that our spectacles will be a joy to see and a joy to perform in!"

The Alchemist studied him for a long moment.

"You wish to make shows with me?"

A faint smile appeared.

"I see."

"I suppose I could help you out a little."

Emu clapped excitedly.

"Yaaay! Welcome to our troupe!"

Beside her, the Songstress lowered her gaze.

"But will I... find the courage to sing?"

"...Nene..."

Rui unconsciously whispered her name.

The stage shifted once more.

"The alchemist made a doll for the shy songstress, which carried her voice even as she hid behind the stage."

A small mechanical doll appeared.

"He also constructed various contraptions..."

Lightning crackled overhead.

"...such as a machine which could produce lightning..."

Jets of air erupted from beneath the stage.

"...a stage with jets of air..."

A massive dragon roared to life.

"...and even an enormous dragon!"

Then—

Everything froze.

The doll suddenly stopped moving.

Its eyes lost their light.

"Alas..."

"Their performance came to an abrupt end when the singing doll broke in the middle of it!"

The audience vanished.

Silence swallowed the stage.

The Troupe Leader clenched his fists.

"What a shameful fiasco!"

"It's all your fault!"

Rui's eyes slowly lowered.

Miku's narration softened.

"The showman was so overwhelmed with disappointment that he blamed the rest of the troupe..."

"Their previous joy and excitement turned to sorrow."

One by one...

The clown left.

The songstress disappeared.

Finally—The alchemist turned away.

"They all left..."

"Each going their own way."

The stage darkened.

"The showman suddenly felt very lonely."

A lone spotlight illuminated Tsukasa.

"He remembered how much he enjoyed preparing the show with the rest of the troupe..."

A tiny fairy floated gently into view.

"His thoughts were interrupted by the appearance of a cute fairy."

The fairy smiled warmly.

"Why were you making shows?"

"Wasn't it because you wanted to make people happy?"

"...!!"

"The showman remembered the first time he saw a theatrical performance and regretted the way he treated his troupe members."

Tsukasa looked toward the audience.

His voice carried no arrogance.

Only sincerity.

"I've always wanted to become a star like the actors in the first show I saw."

"I wanted to be a star so that I too could make people as happy as I was then."

"It was very important to me..."

"...but I forgot it along the way."

"I shall never forget it again!"

His eyes shone.

"What I want is to make people smile."

"I want to perform with my troupe again!"

Rui remained silent.

The stage transformed once more.

"The showman sincerely apologized to the rest of the troupe..."

"And they agreed to come back..."

"...all except the alchemist."

The Alchemist stood alone.

"He didn't believe him."

"He was convinced that the showman didn't care so much about theater as about becoming a star."

"..."

Rui lowered his gaze.

"The showman didn't want to give up."

"He resolved to try a different approach."

"He made a play..."

"...just for the alchemist."

The performance reached its climax.

As the final curtain fell—

The Showman stepped toward the Alchemist.

"It's true that it's my dream to become a star."

"A star who brings joy to everyone!"

"To me..."

"A star is someone who delights the audience as much as his fellow performers with the most wonderful shows!"

He stretched out his hand.

"Please..."

"Believe me this time!"

"With our next show..."

"...we can spread joy to everyone around us."

"Won't you join my troupe again?"

Silence.

The entire Wonderland SEKAI seemed to hold its breath.

"..."

Rui stared at the stage without moving.

KAITO stepped beside him.

"What do you think the alchemist said?"

Rui looked at him.

"What do I think?" This is your role..."

KAITO smiled gently.

"No."

"I am merely a stand-in."

"How the play goes from here has yet to be decided."

Rui looked back toward Tsukasa.

"..."

"...Did you think you could express your feelings better through a performance?"

Tsukasa nodded without hesitation.

"Yes."

"As a matter of fact, I did."

"Theater has given me so much."

"I've seen shows which stirred my feelings..."

"Shows that filled me with enthusiasm."

"They made me dream of starring in shows."

He smiled.

"That's why..."

"My feelings can be communicated most clearly through a show."

"..."

Rui remained silent.

Then—

A memory surfaced.

The quiet playground.

The gentle creaking of swings.

Yuu's calm voice echoed inside his mind.

"Kamishiro-senpai... I'm not asking you to come back."

"If that's what you want... then go ahead."

"It's your choice."

Yuu stood from the swing.

The chains swayed softly.

Then he turned back.

"But..."

"Think about the lonely alchemist."

The memory faded.

Rui's eyes slowly widened.

A smile quietly spread across his face.

"...Heh."

He chuckled under his breath.

"Wonderful shows..."

"...which delight both the audience..."

"...and the performers..."

He looked directly at Tsukasa.

"Hmm."

"I like the sound of that."

His smile became unmistakably genuine.

"But..."

He raised a finger with theatrical elegance.

"A passionate monologue alone isn't enough..."

"...to move an audience."

Tsukasa froze, blinking in surprise.

"..."

The silence that followed Rui's words lingered in the air.

Then, slowly, the corners of his lips curved into a small smile.

"Heh..."

He stepped forward, resting a hand against his chin as though he were evaluating a stage performance.

"Wonderful shows... which delight both the audience and the performers, hmm?" he murmured thoughtfully. "I like the sound of that."

Tsukasa's expression brightened.

"Rui..."

"But," Rui continued with a playful smile, "a passionate monologue alone isn't enough to move an audience."

Tsukasa blinked.

"..."

Rui extended a hand toward him.

"Let's think of how to make your performance more expressive, Tsukasa."

"Huh?"

Nene's eyes widened.

"Do you mean..."

Emu clasped both hands together, practically bouncing in place.

"You mean..."

Tsukasa stared at Rui in disbelief.

"...Rui..."

The silver-haired boy chuckled softly before shaking his head.

"Oh, do not misunderstand."

He placed a hand over his chest with theatrical elegance.

"I am not Rui."

A mischievous grin spread across his face.

"I am the alchemist."

For a brief moment—

Silence.

Then Tsukasa's face burst into a radiant smile.

"All right!"

He clenched his fist with renewed determination.

"Let's go back and try our show one more time!"

The moment those words left his mouth—

A soft glow illuminated the area.

"Huh?"

Tsukasa pulled out his phone.

"The Untitled... It's flashing again?"

The empty score shone brilliantly before gentle musical notes drifted through Wonderland SEKAI.

KAITO smiled knowingly.

"Your feelings are taking the form of a song."

Everyone looked toward him.

"Songs are born from powerful feelings... thoughts... and emotions. When you discover your true feelings, they become music."

Miku nodded cheerfully beside him.

"Yup♪"

She clasped her hands behind her back.

"This song expresses your desire to bring joy to everyone through your performances."

Her turquoise eyes sparkled.

"Shall we sing it together?"

Tsukasa scratched the back of his head awkwardly.

"How can I sing a song I don't even know?"

KAITO smiled warmly.

"It has always existed inside you."

He gently placed a hand over his own chest.

"It will come directly from your heart."

Tsukasa looked down at the glowing phone in silence.

"..."

After a long pause, he slowly lifted his head.

"...But..."

His gaze moved toward Rui...

...then Emu...

...and finally Nene.

"It's not a song I discovered alone."

A smile appeared on his face.

"It's their song just as much as mine."

He looked back toward Miku.

"Would it... be all right if we all sang it together?"

Miku beamed.

"Of course!"

Emu threw both hands into the air.

"We can sing with you? Yaaay! I'm so excited♪"

Nene smiled shyly.

"...I also want to sing."

Rui folded his arms with obvious curiosity.

"A song representing Tsukasa's feelings, hmm?"

His smile widened.

"My interest is piqued."

Tsukasa laughed confidently before raising a fist toward the sky.

"Okay!"

His voice echoed across the stage.

"Let's sing it!"

The glowing score burst into countless rays of light.

Melodies that had existed only within their hearts finally found their voices.

Five voices.

Five hearts.

One wish.

To bring smiles to everyone.

The music flowed throughout Wonderland SEKAI like a gentle breeze, carrying with it every regret, every dream, and every promise they had made together.

Even Miku and KAITO joined them, their voices blending perfectly into the harmony until the entire world itself seemed to sing alongside them.

The stage sparkled brighter than ever before.

Meanwhile...

Far beyond the stage, A lone figure watched everything unfold.

Hidden where neither the audience (the stuffed toys) nor the performers could ever see him.

Yuu smiled quietly.

"...They did it."

He closed his eyes for a brief moment before giving a small nod.

"But..."

His smile softened.

"The job isn't done yet..."

He slowly turned his head.

"...Right, Miku?"

A distortion rippled through the empty air.

Static flickered.

Fragments of light gathered together.

The glitching Miku materialized beside him, her holographic body crackling with digital noise.

She gave a gentle nod.

"...Yeah."

Yuu looked toward the distant sky beyond Wonderland SEKAI.

His expression gradually became serious once more.

"Let's go."

He slipped both hands into his pockets.

"We have to prepare for tomorrow."

The glitching Miku smiled.

Without another word, A brilliant pillar of light descended around the two of them.

Their figures slowly dissolved into countless shimmering fragments before disappearing completely vanishing beyond the stage.

Chapter End Notes

The next chapter is the last chapter for Wonderland x Showtime's Arc (Due to my plans with N25's Arc that might take up to 100 chapters). The series might end at 110 lol

Chapter 88: Finale

Chapter Notes

Finale for WxS, btw!!

See the end of the chapter for more notes

The brilliant light faded.

The familiar park returned.

The evening breeze rustled through the trees as the five figures reappeared exactly where Yuu had been waiting for them.

Yuu, who had been sitting quietly on a wooden bench beneath the streetlamp, slowly stood.

"I was beginning to think Wonderland SEKAI decided to keep you all."

Tsukasa blinked.

"...Yuu."

Before anyone else could react, Emu's face lit up brighter than the evening sky.

"Yuu-kun!"

She sprinted toward him without hesitation and threw her arms around him.

"We did it! We really did it!"

"I know."

A soft laugh escaped Yuu as he gently patted the top of her head.

"I saw everything."

"...Saw?"

Rui's eyes narrowed almost imperceptibly.

The single word carried curiosity more than suspicion.

Yuu immediately scratched the back of his cheek.

"I mean..."

He smiled awkwardly.

"I had faith everything would work out."

Silence lingered.

"...Is that so?"

Rui simply smiled.

Yet there was something hidden behind those words.

A quiet understanding.

One that only he and Yuu seemed to recognize.

Tsukasa stepped forward, folding his arms across his chest.

"...So."

"I suppose everything has been resolved now."

"Hehe..."

Rui adjusted his scarf before giving Tsukasa a graceful bow.

"Indeed."

"My sincerest apologies."

Tsukasa blinked.

"Hm?"

"I judged you too hastily."

Rui raised his head.

"I believed your dream of becoming a star was nothing more than vanity."

A faint smile crossed his lips.

"But I was mistaken."

"You wish to become a star because you wish to make people smile."

"That desire..."

"...is one I share."

For several long seconds...

Tsukasa simply stared.

Then—

"Ha!"

He proudly planted both hands on his hips.

"Of course you were mistaken!"

"I, Tsukasa Tenma, was destined from the very beginning to become a star who shines for everyone!"

His usual boastful grin slowly softened.

"...Still."

"Thanks."

Rui answered with a gentle nod.

"My pleasure."

Nearby, Nene quietly stepped forward.

Her eyes remained lowered as she faced Tsukasa.

"...I'm sorry."

"The robot..."

"It was my fault."

Tsukasa immediately shook his head.

"No."

"...It wasn't."

He looked down at his own hands.

"The one who ruined the show..."

"...was me."

Silence fell over the group once more.

"I forgot why I wanted to stand on stage."

"I cared more about succeeding..."

"...than the people performing beside me."

He inhaled deeply before bowing until his forehead nearly faced the ground.

"So..."

"I'm sorry."

Nene's eyes widened.

She hadn't expected that.

After a moment, a small smile appeared on her face.

"...Thank you."

"I..."

"I'd like to try again."

Emu suddenly clapped both hands together.

"Yay!!"

"I knew everyone would smile again!"

She spun around happily before spreading both arms wide.

"Now Wonder Stage can sparkle again!"

"Wonderhoy!"

"...Wonderhoy."

Nene echoed quietly.

"...Wonderhoy."

Even Rui couldn't suppress a small laugh.

"...Wonderhoy."

Tsukasa let out an exaggerated sigh.

"...Must I really say it?"

Emu nodded enthusiastically.

"Mhm!"

Tsukasa closed his eyes in defeat.

"...Wonderhoy."

The entire group burst into laughter.

Even Yuu couldn't hold it back.

"Heh..."

For the first time since the disastrous performance...

The heavy atmosphere had finally disappeared.

Yet Emu's smile slowly weakened.

"...Uhm... Guys..."

Her voice became noticeably quieter.

"Actually..."

"I need to tell you something."

Everyone turned toward her.

"The Wonder Stage..."

She hesitated.

"...is going to be demolished."

The smiles instantly vanished.

Nene was the first to speak.

"...What?"

"The Wonder Stage is going to be demolished?"

Emu slowly nodded.

"Yes..."

"I'm sorry I didn't tell you earlier."

Rui frowned thoughtfully.

"Hold on."

"That only happens if the stage fails to attract enough visitors before the end of the school break, correct?"

"Correct."

Emu lowered her head.

Tsukasa clenched his fists.

"In that case..."

He looked at each member of the troupe.

"No."

His eyes shone with determination.

"We can save it."

"From today onward..."

"We'll perform every single day."

"We'll make people come."

"We'll fill every seat."

"We'll prove that this stage still deserves to shine!"

Emu's smile returned brighter than ever.

"Let's do this!"

"I'm not giving up either!"

Tsukasa raised a confident fist into the air.

"This stage shall become the birthplace of the greatest theatrical performances the world has ever witnessed!"

Rui smiled.

"Hehe... Now that sounds interesting."

Nene nodded.

"...I'll do my best."

Yuu smiled quietly as he watched them.

"...Let's save Wonder Stage."

The five of them placed their hands together.

"Wonderhoy!!"

Their voices echoed across the quiet amusement park, carrying hope into the evening sky.

The following morning arrived with clear blue skies.

Before the park had even opened to its guests, Wonder Stage was already alive with activity.

Tsukasa rehearsed every line with unwavering intensity.

Emu practiced every dance until her shoes squeaked across the wooden stage.

Rui redesigned props while sketching improvements between rehearsals.

Nene alternated between practicing herself and controlling Robo-Nene, determined not to repeat yesterday's mistake.

Meanwhile, Yuu quietly moved between everyone—helping carry stage equipment, repairing loose props, organizing scripts, handing out drinks, and making sure no one forgot to rest.

As the remainder of the day slipped by, the atmosphere around Wonder Stage gradually transformed.

The quiet rehearsals, nervous smiles, and last-minute adjustments all gave way to anticipation.

It was finally time.

Behind the curtains, the members of Wonderlands×Showtime gathered one last time before stepping onto the stage.

Tsukasa stood proudly in his Prince Pegasus costume, confidently placing both hands on his hips.

"One final check! Costumes and props are all fine!"

Rui glanced around the stage one last time before nodding with satisfaction.

"No problems with the sound system, lights, or stage machinery either."

Nearby, Robo-Nene carefully observed the growing crowd beyond the curtains.

"The audience this time is only half of what we had at our first show..."

She paused before smiling faintly.

"...but that's still quite a lot."

Behind her, Nene quietly tightened her grip on the controller.

"I..."

She took a slow breath.

"I will do my best."

Tsukasa looked toward her with an encouraging smile.

"Nene, remember that, if anything happens, you have me, Emu, and Rui to rely on!"

He pointed confidently toward the stage.

"So spread your wings and don't worry too much!"

Nene nodded.

"I'll try!"

Satisfied, Tsukasa clapped his hands together.

"Okay."

"Now, Emu."

"You do your thing."

Emu tilted her head.

"What thing?"

Tsukasa sighed dramatically.

"You know!"

"Your signature move!"

Emu's eyes sparkled.

"Ah!"

"THAT thing♪"

She beamed.

"All right!"

Just then, Rui slowly looked around the backstage.

"...Wait."

"Where's Yuu?"

Tsukasa froze.

"...Now that I think about it..."

His confident expression instantly faltered.

"I never gave him a script..."

"...or even a role."

"He insisted he wanted to stay as support staff."

Rui chuckled softly.

"Oh?"

"So that's how it is..."

A playful smile crossed his face.

"...Pulling the strings from behind the stage..."

"...How amusing."

"Anyway!"

He raised his fist high into the air.

"Let's do this, everyone!"

Everyone raised theirs together.

"Wonderhoy!!"

Tsukasa stepped toward the curtain.

His cape fluttered dramatically behind him.

"Wonderlands×Showtime..."

He pointed toward the audience.

"It's time to raise the curtain!"

The curtains slowly opened.

Thunderous applause echoed throughout Wonder Stage.

The performance began.

Emu leaped energetically across the stage, laughing with boundless excitement.

"Nyeh heh heh!"

"I'm Emumu, the demon lord's dragon keeper!"

"My dragon will pancake you, foolish prince!"

The children in the audience immediately shouted back.

"Don't give up, Prince Pegasus!"

The cheers filled the stage with life.

Nearby, Robo-Nene gracefully stepped forward.

Her voice flowed gently across the theater.

"Your Highness, please allow me to take care of this."

"Lalalala♪"

Emu exaggeratedly staggered backward.

"Ooh, what a pretty song!"

"But somehow it's..."

"...it's making me unbearably sleepy..."

"Zzz..."

Laughter erupted throughout the audience.

The performance continued seamlessly.

The scenery shifted once more.

Dark lights illuminated the stage as the Demon Lord appeared.

"So you made it this far, Prince..."

"But look at you."

"You're wounded and battered."

"You stand no chance against me."

"So why do you still raise your sword?"

Tsukasa stepped forward without hesitation.

His eyes burned with conviction.

"Why?"

"Isn't it obvious?"

He raised his sword toward the heavens.

"To restore happiness to the world!"

The audience erupted into applause.

Every transition...

Every joke...

Every emotional scene...

Flowed exactly as they had hoped.

No forgotten props.

No malfunctioning robot.

No hesitation.

Only smiles.

When the final curtain call arrived, the four performers stood shoulder to shoulder beneath the warm spotlight.

Together, they bowed deeply.

Tsukasa straightened first.

"We hope you enjoyed our show!"

Emu waved both hands enthusiastically.

"Thank you for coming to see us!"

Nene smiled shyly as she bowed once more.

"Thank you..."

Rui finished with his usual elegant flourish.

"We sincerely appreciate your support."

The applause that followed echoed throughout Wonder Stage.

Children laughed.

Parents smiled.

Even the elderly audience members clapped with genuine delight.

Emu slowly looked across the crowd.

Her eyes began to shimmer.

"Tsukasa..."

She pointed toward the audience.

"Everyone is smiling..."

Her voice trembled.

"This means the world to me, guys."

She wiped the corner of one eye before smiling brightly.

"Thank you so much!"

"And especially you, Tsukasa!"

Tsukasa folded his arms proudly.

"Heh."

"That was a piece of cake..."

He struck his signature pose.

"...for a star such as myself!"

The group laughed together as the curtain slowly closed.

Far away from the stage...

Hidden among the departing audience...

Two figures quietly watched everything unfold.

One was an elderly gentleman dressed in a formal suit.

Beside him stood a familiar first-year student.

Yuu kept his eyes on the stage.

A gentle smile appeared on his face.

"So?"

He asked quietly.

"Does this meet your requirements?"

The old man remained silent.

Without saying a word, he turned around and began walking away.

Yuu simply watched him leave.

Then—

The old man stopped.

Without looking back, he finally spoke.

"...I will not demolish the stage."

A brief silence followed.

"...As there are still people smiling."

Yuu smiled.

"I'll take that as a yes."

The old man resumed walking.

His figure gradually disappeared into the evening crowd.

Yuu remained standing for a few more seconds before letting out a quiet sigh of relief.

"...Looks like this anomaly has been resolved."

Turning away from the audience seats, he made his way toward the backstage entrance.

Beyond the curtains, laughter, congratulations, and excited voices could already be heard.

With a small smile on his face...

Yuu walked forward to reunite with the rest of Wonderlands×Showtime.

The moment he stepped inside, everyone's attention turned toward him.

He clapped his hands once.

"Good job, everyone."

A warm smile spread across his face.

"Guess what."

The four looked at him curiously.

"I counted how many people were in the audience..."

He paused for dramatic effect.

"...and it was half full."

For a brief moment...

Silence.

Then—

"Ohhh!!"

Emu practically bounced into the air, throwing both fists upward.

"We did it! We really did it! Wonderhoy!!"

She spun around in circles before happily grabbing both Tsukasa's and Nene's hands.

"Half the seats!"

"That's waaay more than before!"

"We're getting closer!"

Nene blinked in surprise.

"...Really?"

She looked toward Yuu for confirmation.

Yuu nodded.

"Really."

"I counted every single person."

A small smile appeared on Nene's face.

"...That's..."

"...better than I expected."

Tsukasa crossed his arms proudly before laughing loudly.

"Ha! Naturally!"

"Once this star takes center stage, audiences are bound to gather!"

He dramatically flipped his cape.

"And before long..."

He pointed toward the sky.

"...every single seat in Wonder Stage shall be filled!"

Rui chuckled softly.

"Hehe..."

"It appears our efforts weren't wasted after all."

He adjusted his scarf as he glanced toward the still-busy audience leaving the park.

"Word of mouth spreads faster than advertisements."

"If today's audience enjoyed themselves..."

"...tomorrow's may be even larger."

Emu's eyes sparkled.

"Then let's make tomorrow even more fun!"

"And the day after that!"

"And the day after that too!"

She suddenly grabbed everyone's hands.

"We'll make everyone smile together!"

"Wonderhoy!!"

"...Wonderhoy."

Nene quietly echoed with a shy smile.

"...Wonderhoy."

Rui followed with an amused laugh.

Tsukasa sighed dramatically.

"...Must I keep saying this?"

Emu nodded enthusiastically.

"Mhm!"

Tsukasa closed his eyes in surrender before raising one fist.

"...Wonderhoy!"

Everyone burst into laughter once again.

The celebrations gradually came to an end.

One after another, the members of Wonderlands×Showtime gathered their belongings and headed home, their laughter slowly fading into the evening air. The stage that had been bustling with excitement only moments ago grew quiet once more, illuminated by the warm orange glow of the setting sun.

Yuu remained behind for a little while.

After making sure everything had been packed away, he quietly left Wonder Stage and began walking through the nearly empty paths of Phoenix Wonderland.

The park was far calmer than it had been during the performance. The cheerful chatter of visitors had become distant, replaced by the gentle rustling of leaves and the rhythmic chirping of cicadas welcoming the evening.

"..."

His hands rested inside his pockets as he walked at an unhurried pace.

Then—

Tap.

A pair of footsteps echoed behind him.

Tap... Tap... Tap...

They weren't trying to hide themselves.

The pace was measured.

Calm.

Almost leisurely.

Yuu let out a quiet breath before stopping in place.

"...Kamishiro-senpai."

The footsteps halted.

A moment later, Yuu turned around.

Standing several meters away, illuminated by the golden light of dusk, was Rui Kamishiro.

For the first time in a while...

Rui genuinely looked surprised.

"...How could you tell?"

Yuu gave a small shrug.

"The sound of your shoes."

Silence lingered for a brief moment.

Then Rui smiled.

"...You must be really detail-oriented."

"So?"

Yuu folded his arms.

"What do you want from me?"

Rui slowly stepped closer, his violet eyes never leaving Yuu's.

"I've been meaning to say this, Yuu."

His smile remained as elegant as ever.

"I'm highly suspicious of you."

Yuu couldn't help smiling.

"We're talking about this again, Kamishiro-senpai?"

"I can't help but be interested."

Rui tilted his head ever so slightly.

"Shouldn't you take responsibility for that?"

"..."

For the first time since they met...

Yuu's smile became slightly wry.

"...You're sharp."

He scratched the back of his neck before letting out a quiet laugh.

"I can't hide anything from you."

"Oh?"

Rui's eyes narrowed with amusement.

"So you admit there's something to hide."

Yuu didn't answer.

Instead...

He simply smiled.

Rui took another step forward.

"You've been trying very hard to remain in the background."

"But despite that..."

He gently raised a finger.

"...you've been moving everyone exactly where you wanted them."

He counted them one by one.

"Emu."

Another finger.

"Tsukasa."

Another.

"Nene."

Finally...

He pointed toward himself.

"...Even me."

A faint chuckle escaped him.

"Hehe..."

His eyes met Yuu's.

"You're very wicked."

Rui folded his hands behind his back as the two continued walking beneath the dim glow of the park lamps. His expression was unusually thoughtful, his voice softer than before.

"...Let me tell you a story, Yuu-kun."

Yuu glanced at him briefly before looking ahead once more.

"...I'm listening."

A faint smile tugged at Rui's lips.

"The title is called..."

He paused just long enough for the silence to settle between them.

"The Hero Who Walked Behind the Curtain."

"The story begins with a kingdom plagued by countless disasters. Whenever a village burned, someone would rebuild it before dawn."

"Whenever monsters appeared, they would already be defeated by the time the knights arrived. Whenever despair threatened to consume the people..."

"...hope would mysteriously return."

"No one knew who was responsible. They simply believed miracles happened."

Rui's gaze drifted toward the evening sky.

"There were many celebrated heroes."

"A brave swordsman, A wise king, A brilliant mage."

"They received medals and cheers."

"They received songs written in their honor."

He chuckled softly. "Yet none of them knew that someone had been clearing the road before they ever arrived."

Yuu remained silent.

"The real hero wandered alone. He never accepted rewards."

"He never revealed his name. He merely repaired broken bridges before the travelers reached them."

"He extinguished fires before anyone noticed the smoke."

"He quietly nudged people toward one another..."

"Then disappeared before they could thank him."

Rui's voice grew quieter.

"Eventually... The kingdom came to believe that every hero was simply extraordinary."

"No one questioned why everything always worked out."

"No one realized there had always been someone standing behind the curtain."

The two reached a crossroads.

Their footsteps slowed.

"The strange thing is..."

Rui smiled to himself.

"The hero was perfectly content with that."

"He believed the happiest ending was one where everyone else smiled."

"Even if he had to carry every burden himself."

"Even if history forgot his name."

He looked sideways at Yuu.

"And because he carried everything alone..."

"...he never noticed something."

Yuu finally spoke.

"...What?"

Rui's smile softened.

"Heroes..."

"...are allowed to have companions."

The evening breeze drifted between them.

"They don't have to shoulder every tragedy."

"They don't have to solve every problem."

"They don't have to hide every wound."

"They simply convince themselves they do."

Rui looked ahead once more.

"The story ends with a question."

His violet eyes reflected the fading sunset.

"If the kingdom discovered that its anonymous hero had been suffering all this time..."

"...would they still allow him to walk alone?"

Silence.

Only the sound of their footsteps remained.

Then Rui laughed quietly.

"...Hehe."

"It's an unfinished story."

He turned toward Yuu with an unreadable smile.

"What do you think, Yuu-kun?"

"Should the hero continue walking behind the curtain or should he finally step onto the stage?"

Yuu stood motionless.

Neither of them spoke.

Rui's story lingered in the silence between them.

The Hero Who Walked Behind the Curtain

It was no longer merely a story.

It had become a question.

A question directed at only one person.

"..."

Yuu lowered his eyes.

His thoughts churned quietly.

After a long moment, Rui broke the silence.

"...Don't you think it's time for the hero to step onto the stage?"

Yuu remained still.

His expression didn't change.

"..."

Rui smiled faintly.

"I know what will happen to the hero." Those words finally drew Rui's attention.

He looked up.

"Oh?" Rui tilted his head ever so slightly.

"Then tell me... What will the hero do?"

For a brief instant...

Yuu's lips curled into a small, almost nostalgic smile.

"I'll tell you the answer..."

He lifted his gaze toward the evening sky.

"...once we all go back to Wonderland SEKAI."

Rui blinked.

Then—

"Fufu..."

A quiet laugh escaped him.

"So you're going to leave the ending on a cliffhanger?"

"Very well."

His smile remained as enigmatic as ever.

"I suppose I'll have to wait."

He turned around.

"I'll see you later, then."

Yuu gave a small nod.

"...Yeah."

Without another word, Rui walked away.

His footsteps gradually disappeared into the distance until only silence remained.

Yuu didn't move.

Not immediately.

The faint smile that had rested on his face slowly vanished.

His expression became unreadable.

Empty.

As though every emotion had been carefully locked away.

He quietly lowered his head.

...

(Let me tell you my answer...as the hero.)

His fingers unconsciously tightened inside his pockets.

(Soon... the hero would seek out the witch. And he would ask her for one final favor.)

(The hero would round up everyone.)

(And.)

(Erase the memories.)

(Erase every smile they shared with him.)

(Every conversation.)

(Every laugh.)

(Until not a single trace of the nameless hero remained.)

Because... Heroes who walked behind the curtain were never meant to receive applause.

If the audience remembered the one pulling the strings...

Then the story itself would change.

And that was the one thing he could never allow.

Yuu slowly closed his eyes.

(No matter how painful it may be...)

(If forgetting me allows everyone to keep smiling, then that will become my happy ending.)

(And I could finally leave this place as planned.)

A gentle breeze swept across the empty path.

Chapter End Notes

By the way, guys! I'm still open with N25 Prediction :D

Chapter 89: What Awaits the Storm

A week had passed since the incident at Wonder Stage.

To everyone else, it had become nothing more than another memory of a successful performance.

To Yuu it had become something that never happened.

The corridors of Kamiyama High bustled with their usual afternoon chatter as students made their way between classrooms. Sunlight streamed through the windows, painting long golden lines across the polished floor.

Among the crowd walked Hazuki Yuu.

His expression remained calm as always.

Ordinary.

That was exactly how it needed to be.

After erasing the memories of Wonderlands×Showtime, he carefully kept his distance from them.

Whenever Tsukasa's loud voice echoed down the hallway, Yuu would simply take another route.

Whenever Rui happened to pass by, Yuu would lower his gaze and continue walking as though they had never spoken before.

Even Nene...

She occasionally crossed paths with him near the library, yet neither of them acknowledged the other.

There was no recognition.

Only strangers brushing past each other.

It was lonely...

...but loneliness was a small price compared to breaking the story.

Far away from reality.

[Glitching SEKAI]

The scenery flickered between fragments of every SEKAI Yuu had visited.

Everything overlapped imperfectly, like corrupted memories refusing to settle into place.

At the center of it all stood Yuu.

Across from him, the glitching Miku smiled, her figure occasionally dissolving into digital static before returning to normal.

"So, Yuu-kun."

She clasped her hands behind her back. "Is Nightcord at 25:00 next?"

Yuu nodded.

"Yeah."

He sighed.

"I'm just trying to figure out how to approach them without making them panic or making everything look suspicious."

"Hmm..."

Miku floated around him thoughtfully.

"Then why don't we review their story first?"

Yuu folded his arms.

"...Right."

After a brief silence, he began recalling everything he knew.

"Nightcord at 25:00 began with one person."

"Kanade Yoisaki."

She wanted to create music that could save people.

Not music that became famous...

Not music that topped rankings...

Simply music capable of reaching someone suffering somewhere in the world.

To do that, she created an online music circle.

A place where nobody needed to reveal their identity.

Everyone only knew each other by usernames.

One by one...

She gathered members.

First came Yuki, better known as Mafuyu Asahina.

Kanade discovered one of Mafuyu's older songs online and invited her to compose together.

Then... Kanade found illustrations uploaded by Enanan.

The artist's drawings perfectly captured the emotions hidden inside her music.

That artist was Ena Shinonome.

Finally... Someone uploaded a music video using Kanade's song.

The editing, visuals, even the vocals...

Everything fit perfectly.

That creator was Amia.

Mizuki Akiyama.

Before long...

The four of them became Nightcord at 25:00.

An online group connected only through messages and music.

They didn't know each other's real names.

They didn't know each other's faces.

Not until much later.

Then...

Everything changed.

One day, one of the members suddenly stopped responding.

Instead...

An unfamiliar file appeared.

A song titled...

Untitled.

The moment each of them played it...

They were drawn into the Empty SEKAI.

And that...was where their story truly began.

The Glitching SEKAI fell silent.

Miku nodded slowly.

"So..."

"It's an internet story."

"Pretty much."

Yuu rubbed the back of his neck.

"Which makes things difficult."

"I can't exactly bump into them naturally the same way I did with Wonderlands×Showtime."

"They barely meet in person."

Miku tilted her head.

"Then maybe...you should first understand the people instead of the group."

Yuu looked up.

"You're right! Ena and Mizuki. They both attend Kamiyama High."

"Mizuki goes during the day while Ena attends night classes."

"They're the easiest people for you to observe without interfering with Nightcord itself."

Yuu quietly considered her suggestion.

"...That's true."

"But there's one problem."

He let out another sigh.

"I want to avoid Akito as much as possible."

Even after the memory wipe... No guarantee seeing Yuu repeatedly wouldn't stir something buried deep inside his subconscious.

Not a memory...

Just...a feeling.

And feelings were dangerous.

Miku giggled softly.

"So your first targets are Ena and Mizuki?"

"...Looks that way."

"But..."

Yuu stared into the shifting sky of the Glitching SEKAI.

"...How do I get close to two people I've never spoken to...without making either of them suspicious?"

Yuu had already decided on one thing.

He wasn't going to force his way into Nightcord at 25:00.

Not yet.

For now...

He would leave everything to one simple force.

Coincidence.

If fate wanted him to meet them, then it would happen naturally.

With that thought in mind, Yuu continued his routine as an ordinary student at Kamiyama High.

Every morning, he wandered through the school grounds with seemingly no destination.

Whenever classes ended, he'd take a different route home, occasionally passing through areas where he vaguely remembered certain students spending their time.

His eyes casually scanned every face.

Pink hair?

No.

A familiar ribbon?

No.

Not there either.

"..."

Another day passed.

Still nothing.

The following morning...

Nothing again.

By the third day, Yuu finally stopped in the middle of the hallway.

"..."

He slowly raised a hand to his forehead.

"...I'm an idiot."

A long sigh escaped him.

"Mizuki doesn't even come to school..."

He buried his face in his hands.

"I completely forgot."

Of course they didn't.

Mizuki Akiyama was infamous for having one of the worst attendance records at Kamiyama High.

Skipping classes wasn't unusual.

It was practically expected.

"I've been searching the school..."

"...for someone who rarely comes here."

Yuu let out a defeated laugh.

"What a waste of time."

Shaking his head, he pulled out his phone while making his way toward the school gates.

The screen lit up with a string of notifications.

One immediately caught his attention.

YouTube

A new upload from N25.

"..."

His thumb hovered over the notification before opening it.

Without hesitation, he tapped the thumbs-up icon before closing the app.

Another notification appeared almost immediately.

Instagram

@Enanan uploaded a new illustration.

Yuu opened the post.

The artwork carried the same emotional atmosphere he had come to expect—beautiful, expressive, and overflowing with feelings that words alone couldn't convey.

"...Still amazing."

He pressed the heart button.

Like.

Then quietly locked his phone.

The screen faded to black as he slipped it back into his pocket.

The afternoon breeze drifted through the streets of Shibuya.

Students chatted happily as they walked past him, completely unaware of the thoughts running through his mind.

Yuu stared absentmindedly toward the busy intersection ahead.

"So..." He muttered to himself. "...what should I do now?"

A familiar blur suddenly rushed past him.

"...Hm?"

Yuu instinctively glanced toward the movement.

His eyes widened.

Pink hair.

Soft curls gathered into a side ponytail, neatly tied with a ribbon that swayed with every hurried step.

There was no mistaking it.

(THERE YOU ARE!!)

For a split second, excitement overtook him.

He almost called out.

"Mizu—"

The word never left his lips.

Yuu froze.

"..."

"...Wait."

His expression immediately flattened.

(Wouldn't that be incredibly suspicious?)

(Someone you've never met suddenly calls your name in the middle of the street?)

(Yeah... that's a terrible first impression.)

He pinched the bridge of his nose.

"Congratulations, Yuu."

"That would've been the fastest way to make someone run away from you."

He let out a quiet sigh before straightening his posture.

"...Right."

A determined glint returned to his eyes.

"If I can't approach them directly..."

He snapped his fingers.

"...then it's time."

"The Power of Coincidence Plan."

His declaration was immediately followed by complete silence.

A passing student glanced at him strangely.

Yuu quickly coughed into his fist.

"...I really need to stop saying these things out loud."

Pretending nothing had happened, he casually began walking in the same direction Mizuki had gone.

Not too close.

Not too far.

Just enough to keep them within sight.

Mizuki strolled through the bustling streets as though they had nowhere in particular to be, occasionally stopping to admire colorful storefronts before continuing onward with an easygoing pace.

Yuu quietly tailed behind them, blending into the afternoon crowd.

"..."

"..."

After nearly fifteen minutes of walking...

The destination finally became obvious.

Large automatic glass doors slid open before Mizuki stepped inside.

Above the entrance stood an enormous shopping complex.

"...A mall."

Yuu nodded to himself.

"Of course."

"If there's one place Mizuki would naturally spend time..."

"...it's here."

Taking one last glance at the bustling entrance, he slipped both hands into his pockets before casually following them inside.

"...Phase One of the Power of Coincidence Plan..."

"...commence."

Yuu kept a safe distance as he followed Mizuki through the crowded shopping mall.

Not too close.

Not too far.

Just enough that he wouldn't lose sight of the pink-haired student weaving effortlessly through the sea of shoppers.

(Rule number one of following someone...) he reminded himself. (Never make it obvious.)

He slowed whenever Mizuki slowed.

He stopped whenever Mizuki stopped.

And whenever Mizuki glanced toward a store window, Yuu immediately pretended to be fascinated by something nearby.

"..."

A display of discounted frying pans.

"Interesting craftsmanship..."

Another customer walked by, giving him a puzzled look.

Yuu awkwardly walked away.

"..."

Mizuki wandered into a clothing boutique.

Yuu waited outside.

A minute passed.

Two minutes.

Five.

"...Shopping really is serious business..."

Eventually, Mizuki emerged carrying a small paper bag, humming happily to themself.

"Mission still alive."

Yuu quietly resumed following.

The mall bustled with life.

Children laughed as they ran past holding balloons.

Couples browsed gift shops together.

The scent of fresh bread drifted from a nearby bakery.

Mizuki, meanwhile, looked completely at home.

They peeked into accessory stores.

Stopped to admire cute plushies.

Lingered in front of a cosmetics shop.

Occasionally, they smiled to themselves, as though mentally collecting ideas.

(Just like the stories said...) Yuu thought. (They really enjoy fashion.)

He subconsciously reached for his phone.

(Should I pretend to accidentally bump into them...?)

(No, it's too forced)

(Maybe ask for directions?)

(No...)

(What if they think I'm weird?)

(Drop something?)

"..."

(That only works in romance manga.)

He sighed.

(Why is talking to people so difficult?")

Without realizing it, Mizuki entered another store.

Yuu absentmindedly followed, only to stop dead in his tracks.

"..."

"...Eh?"

He slowly looked around.

Mirrors, Mannequins, Elegant dresses, Formal suits, Cute and Frilly outfits.

"..."

"...I've made a terrible mistake."

He turned to leave—

"Excuse me, sir!"

A cheerful employee approached him with sparkling eyes.

"Are you looking for something special today? We have a wonderful couple's campaign—"

"N-No, thank you."

"Oh? Then perhaps you're shopping with your partner?"

"My... partner?"

The employee smiled knowingly and pointed behind him.

"The pink-haired customer who came in just before you."

"..."

Yuu froze.

"Wait."

(That's how this looks?!)

Before he could explain—

A familiar voice called from deeper inside the boutique. "Hmm?"

Mizuki turned around after hearing the conversation.

Their curious eyes landed directly on Yuu.

The two stared at each other across the shop.

"..."

"..."

Yuu's mind went completely blank.

(Power of Coincidence Plan, my ass... This is not how it was supposed to start.)

For several painfully long seconds...

Neither of them moved.

Yuu's brain desperately searched for an explanation.

(Think! Think! Anything!)

The enthusiastic employee looked back and forth between the two of them, her smile growing even brighter as if she had pieced together the perfect story in her mind.

"Oh my," she said warmly. "Were you two meeting here?"

The question caught them both off guard.

Mizuki blinked once.

"...No?"

They tilted their head, studying the boy standing a few steps away.

"I don't think we've met before."

Silence settled between them.

Yuu scratched the back of his neck with an embarrassed smile.

"...That's true."

"We've literally never spoken."

He let out an awkward laugh.

"Y-Yeah... Sorry. I think there was a misunderstanding."

The employee's shoulders slumped ever so slightly.

"Oh... I see."

Giving them both a polite bow, she quietly excused herself and walked away to greet another customer.

The moment she disappeared...

The silence returned.

"..."

"..."

It was Mizuki who broke it first.

"That was awkward, huh."

Yuu laughed sheepishly.

"...A little."

Mizuki studied his face again, this time with genuine curiosity.

"Huh... Have we met before?"

"No..."

Yuu answered almost immediately.

(...Yes. In another timeline.)

(Or... something close to that.)

He swallowed those thoughts before they could reach his lips.

Mizuki hummed thoughtfully.

"I see..."

They narrowed their eyes just slightly.

"Your face is really familiar."

A playful smile appeared.

"Anyway, what's your name?"

"I'm Hazuki Yuu."

"Hazuki, huh..."

Mizuki nodded before placing a hand on their chest.

"My name is Mizuki Akiyama."

Their cheerful grin returned almost instantly.

"So?"

"What brings you here?"

The question struck Yuu like a critical hit.

(Okay...)

(This is it.)

(Power of Coincidence Plan... don't fail me now.)

Trying to sound as natural as possible, he replied,

"Actually... I've been looking for a good outfit for my friend."

Mizuki's eyes sparkled.

"Ohh?"

"May I know her measurements?"

"..."

Yuu froze.

His smile remained perfectly still.

Inside his mind, however—

(Measurements?)

(Ack—!)

(I didn't think this far ahead!)

(Should I just make them up?)

(No, what if they start recommending clothes and realize the proportions don't make any sense?)

The words simply started spilling out before he could stop them.

"About... one hundred and sixty-two centimeters."

Mizuki nodded thoughtfully.

"Mhm."

"Fairly slim..."

"...Maybe skirts every now and then..."

Yuu paused.

(Wait...)

(Why am I describing someone this specifically?)

(This is literally just becoming an actual person!)

He quickly tried to salvage it.

"Ah—but those are only... rough estimates."

Mizuki rested a finger against their chin, completely invested.

"Hmmm..."

"So she's the quiet type?"

Yuu instinctively answered.

"Very."

"And she's kind..."

"...Always thinks about other people before herself."

"...Works really hard."

"...Even if nobody notices."

"..."

The moment those words left his mouth...

Yuu froze.

(...What am I saying?)

(That's...)

(That's just Kanade.)

His eyes widened ever so slightly.

Mizuki smiled gently.

"Hehe..."

"You really care about your friend, don't you?"

Yuu looked away.

"I..."

"...Yeah."

(In the end, I blurted her... I wonder why I suddenly think of her.)

Mizuki clapped their hands together.

"All right!"

"I think I have the perfect outfit in mind."

They flashed him a confident grin.

"Come on! Let's find something that'll suit your friend!"

Before Yuu could even respond, Mizuki grabbed him lightly by the wrist and began leading him deeper into the clothing store.

"W-Wait—"

"No waiting!"

Mizuki laughed.

"If you're going to buy a gift, we're doing it properly!"

Yuu could only let out a helpless sigh as he followed.

(...Power of Coincidence Plan...)

(Step one... somehow succeeded?)

(Although... this feels less like coincidence... and more like I've been adopted by an extrovert.)

As they wandered deeper into the boutique, rows of neatly arranged clothes stretched out before them. Dresses, jackets, sweaters, and accessories lined the shelves in every imaginable color.

Mizuki suddenly stopped in front of a clothing rack and turned around with a mischievous smile.

"By the way," they said, pointing at Yuu. "Since I'm helping you, you should help me as well!"

Yuu tilted his head.

"Hm?"

"I need an outside opinion!"

Without waiting for an answer, Mizuki pulled a few outfits from the rack and held them against themselves one after another.

"So?"

"Which one looks best?"

Yuu glanced at the different outfits before looking back at Mizuki.

"Sure..."

He scratched his cheek awkwardly.

"...But I think every outfit would look good on you."

"...Ah?"

For the first time since they had met, Mizuki's playful expression faltered.

A faint blush crept across their cheeks.

"Hehe..."

They let out a small, embarrassed chuckle while brushing a strand of pink hair behind their ear.

"You're unexpectedly smooth."

Yuu blinked.

"...Was that supposed to be smooth?"

"It wasn't?"

"No."

"I was just being honest."

"..."

Mizuki stared at him for a few seconds before bursting into laughter.

"Pfft— Ahahaha!"

"Now that's dangerous."

"Dangerous?"

"People who say things like that with a completely straight face."

They pointed accusingly at him, though their smile never faded.

"They're the scariest kind."

Yuu could only give an innocent shrug.

"I don't really understand..."

"I can see that."

Mizuki laughed once more before holding up two different outfits.

"All right, Mr. Honest."

"Since your opinion is apparently trustworthy..."

They held up one outfit in each hand.

"Which one?"

As the final shopping bag was tucked neatly into Mizuki's arms, the two stepped out of the boutique together.

The shopping district had begun to glow beneath the warm colors of the setting sun. Golden light spilled across the sidewalks as the evening crowd gradually replaced the afternoon shoppers. Conversations drifted through the air, accompanied by distant music from nearby cafés and the occasional laughter of children running past.

Mizuki stretched both arms overhead with a satisfied sigh.

"Uwahh... Look at the time..."

Yuu glanced toward the sky before checking the time on his phone.

"...Yeah."

A small smile appeared on his face.

"We've been doing this for two hours now."

"Haha... Seriously?"

Mizuki laughed, looking down at the collection of shopping bags.

"I was only planning to browse a little. You somehow turned 'a little' into an entire afternoon."

"Hey!" Mizuki puffed out their cheeks. "That's not my fault!"

"It absolutely is."

"Pfft."

The two couldn't help laughing together.

After calming down, Mizuki looked at him with a bright smile.

"Hehe... Thank you, Hazuki."

"It's no problem."

Yuu scratched the back of his neck awkwardly.

"I actually had fun."

"...Really?"

"Yeah."

There was no lie in that answer.

Even if the meeting had been carefully orchestrated by him...

The conversations...

The laughter...

Those had all been genuine.

Mizuki smiled a little wider.

"Oh!"

As if remembering something, they snapped their fingers.

"Speaking of which!"

They pulled out their phone.

"Wanna exchange contacts?"

Yuu blinked.

"...Are you trying to pick me up?"

For a brief second...

Mizuki froze.

"...Huh?!"

A faint blush spread across their cheeks before they burst into laughter.

"Hahaha! What kind of conclusion is that?"

"I mean!"

They waved both hands frantically.

"It'd just be nice to have someone accompany me sometimes."

"And besides..."

Mizuki pointed at him dramatically.

"You're surprisingly good at fashion."

"Haha..."

Yuu gave an embarrassed smile.

"Am I?"

"Oh, stop being humble."

Without waiting for another excuse, Mizuki opened the QR code on their messaging app and held out the screen.

"C'mon."

Yuu sighed in surrender before taking out his own phone.

A second later—

Beep.

The contact request was accepted.

"There!"

Mizuki grinned proudly.

"Now we're officially friends."

"...Friends, huh."

Yuu quietly repeated the word.

It sounded strangely foreign.

Yet...

Not unpleasant.

Mizuki slipped their phone back into their pocket before taking a few steps backward.

"Anyway!"

They raised one hand with a cheerful wave.

"See ya, Hazuki!"

They even finished it with a playful wink.

Yuu couldn't help smiling back.

"...See you, Mizuki."

With one last wave, Mizuki disappeared into the evening crowd, humming happily to themself.

Yuu remained where he stood.

The smile stayed on his face...

For only a few seconds.

Then—It faded.

His expression became perfectly calm.

Emotionless.

Like someone quietly switching off a mask.

(That worked well.)

Yuu had already taken a few steps away from the shopping district.

Up next... Ena Shinonome.

If his memory served him correctly, she would usually—

He stopped.

"...Huh?"

A strange pressure suddenly crushed against his chest.

It wasn't pain.

Not exactly.

It felt as though something invisible had slammed into his entire body.

"...What...?"

His breathing became uneven.

His heartbeat echoed loudly in his ears.

Thump.

Thump.

"...Why do I have a bad feeling..."

He instinctively placed a hand against the nearest wall, steadying himself.

The sensation lingered only for a second—

Then vanished.

"..."

Yuu frowned.

That feeling...

It wasn't coming from him.

It was coming from somewhere else.

Almost like the world itself had screamed.

Without realizing it, his feet had already begun moving.

Then—

Voices.

"...Did someone get hit?"

"Call an ambulance!"

"Move back!"

"There was someone crossing the road!"

Yuu froze.

A crowd had gathered near the intersection.

People stood shoulder to shoulder, blocking his view.

"No..."

His voice barely escaped his lips.

Not again...

Please...

His legs moved before his mind could catch up.

"Excuse me!"

He squeezed between frightened pedestrians.

"Sorry—"

"Let me through!"

Someone looked back in annoyance, but the expression disappeared the moment they saw the urgency on his face.

The crowd slowly parted.

Yuu stepped into the opening.

And then...

His eyes widened.

"...Mizuki...?"

Lying on the pavement was the person he had only just parted ways with.

The shopping bags were scattered across the road.

The ribbon in Mizuki's side ponytail fluttered gently in the evening breeze.

Everything suddenly became eerily quiet.

"...No..."

The pain returned.

Far stronger than before.

"Gh...!"

His knees buckled.

It felt as though his entire body was being torn apart from the inside.

His vision shook violently.

(Ah...)

(It hurts...)

Unable to keep himself standing any longer, Yuu collapsed beside Mizuki.

Darkness slowly crept into the edges of his vision.

The last thing he saw was the flashing red and blue lights of an approaching ambulance—

Before everything faded to black.

Chapter 90: Familiarity

Silence.

Not the silence of an empty room.

Nor the silence of the night.

It was a silence that existed beyond time itself—a place where countless worlds floated like stars suspended in an endless sea of darkness.

Among those stars...

One shone brighter than the rest.

Project SEKAI.

Within it, countless threads of fate intertwined, split apart, and reconnected, forming an intricate tapestry of stories.

A lone figure watched them all.

Blue flames flickered gently around the hem of his black suit.

The Agent.

His hands rested behind his back as his gaze wandered across the countless memories playing before him like fragments of stained glass.

A school rooftop.

A live stage.

A backstreet alley.

An amusement park.

One by one, each memory drifted past.

Leo/Need.

More More Jump.

Vivid BAD SQUAD.

Wonderlands×Showtime.

"..."

His lips slowly curled upward.

"So you've really done it."

With a wave of his hand, the memories aligned themselves into four glowing world.

Each world represented a story.

Each story... now complete.

The Agent chuckled quietly.

"You really are an amusing little variable."

His eyes drifted toward a fifth circle.

Empty SEKAI.

The smile faded from his face.

"...Nightcord at 25:00."

Blue flames crackled softly around his fingertips.

"The final group."

He remained silent for a long while.

Then— "...One more."

His voice echoed across the endless void.

"Just one more story..."

"...and you'll fulfill the conditions of the bet."

The words lingered in the air.

The Agent slowly closed his eyes.

"...I can't allow that."

The Agent lowered his head respectfully.

"...Don't worry."

His grin slowly returned.

"I know exactly where to strike."

With another snap of his fingers, countless glowing threads appeared before him.

Some were golden.

Some silver.

Some already beginning to unravel.

Among them...

One thread pulsed brighter than the rest.

Yuu Hazuki.

"...You've been protecting every story."

"...Making sure each heart reaches its destined ending."

His finger hovered over the glowing thread.

"But what happens..."

"...when the story itself refuses to cooperate?"

A second thread appeared.

It was different.

Distorted.

Twisted.

Its light glitched violently as though rejecting reality itself.

The Agent's grin widened.

"...An anomaly."

"...Not yours."

"...Mine."

...Returning to Yuu's perspective.

Yuu's breath caught in his throat as his vision blurred for a split second.

"...!"

He staggered half a step, one hand instinctively clutching his chest.

"So?" a cheerful voice asked from beside him. "Which one looks best?"

His eyes shot upward.

Mannequins.

Shopping bags.

The familiar clothing boutique.

"..."

His pupils shrank.

He drew in a sharp, ragged breath.

"...Hah...!"

His heart hammered violently against his ribs.

No...

His gaze darted around the store.

Customers continued browsing as though nothing had happened.

The cashier folded another customer's purchase into a paper bag.

Soft music drifted through the speakers overhead.

Everything...

Everything was exactly the same.

Yuu slowly turned toward the person standing beside him.

Pink hair tied into a familiar side ponytail.

A playful smile.

Mizuki.

They held up two different outfits, waiting patiently for his opinion.

"So?" Mizuki asked again with a small pout. "Don't just stand there spacing out."

"..."

Yuu stared at them.

His fingers trembled almost imperceptible.

(I returned...)

His breathing grew uneven.

(I looped...!)

The realization struck him harder than any physical blow.

(I looped again!!)

"...Hazuki?"

Mizuki lowered the clothes slightly, concern replacing the teasing smile.

"Hey..."

"You look really pale."

"...Are you okay?"

Yuu blinked.

His racing thoughts came to an abrupt halt.

"...Ah."

He forced his breathing to steady.

"...Yeah."

Mizuki frowned.

Without warning, they reached forward and gently squished both of Yuu's cheeks between their hands.

"Hey."

Their usual playful tone was still there, but beneath it was unmistakable concern. "Tell me."

"What happened?"

Yuu's eyes widened slightly.

His voice caught in his throat.

He wanted to answer.

To say he was fine.

To laugh it off like he always did.

But the image wouldn't leave his mind.

"..."

Mizuki studied his expression for a few long seconds.

"...That's not the face of someone who's okay."

They slowly let go of his cheeks, their teasing smile fading into something softer.

"You've been acting strange ever since a minute ago."

"You suddenly froze..."

"...then you looked at me like I disappeared."

"..."

Yuu lowered his gaze.

"...Sorry."

Mizuki sighed dramatically, placing both hands on their hips.

"'Sorry' isn't an explanation."

They leaned forward until they were almost eye level with him.

"Did something happen at home?"

Yuu shook his head.

"No."

"School?"

"...No."

"A girl rejected you?"

"...What?"

That earned the faintest twitch at the corner of Yuu's mouth.

Mizuki immediately pointed at him with a triumphant grin.

"Aha!"

"There it is!"

"You smiled!"

"..."

"...Just a little."

Yuu let out a quiet sigh.

"...You're surprisingly good at cheering people up."

"Hehe."

Mizuki folded their arms proudly.

"I've had lots of practice."

Then, after a brief pause, their smile became gentler.

"...You don't have to tell me if you don't want to."

"But..."

"If something's bothering you..."

"...don't carry it all by yourself, okay?"

Yuu froze.

Those simple words struck deeper than Mizuki could ever know.

(Don't carry it all by yourself...)

For a fleeting moment, Rui's story of the lonely hero resurfaced in his mind.

The hero who bore every burden alone.

The hero who believed no one else should suffer.

Yuu slowly closed his eyes.

(...I can't.)

(Not yet.)

He opened his eyes once more and offered a small, genuine smile.

"...Thank you."

"I'll be okay."

Mizuki stared at him for a moment before puffing out their cheeks.

"Hmm..."

"I don't completely believe you..."

"...but I'll let you off this time."

They held up the two outfits again with a bright smile.

"Now!"

"Enough gloomy faces!"

"Which one suits me better?"

Yuu looked at the clothes...

But this time, part of his attention remained fixed on the large glass windows overlooking the street outside.

His expression remained calm.

Yet his eyes never stopped searching.

(If this really is a loop...)

(Then the accident hasn't happened yet.)

(Which means...)

(I still have time to save Mizuki.)

Yuu casually adjusted the shopping bag in his hand before glancing toward Mizuki.

"...Say."

"Hm?"

"What school do you go to?"

Mizuki's steps slowed.

They turned to him with a curious tilt of the head.

"...Why?"

Yuu scratched the back of his neck, trying to sound as natural as possible.

"I was thinking... It'd be nice to hang out again after school sometime."

He gave a small shrug.

"Unless you go to Miyamasuzaka Girls' Academy."

"Hehe..."

A quiet laugh escaped them.

"Kamiyama High."

Yuu blinked.

"Oh?"

"So we're in the same school."

He looked genuinely surprised.

"Funny... I don't think I've ever seen you around."

The smile on Mizuki's face instantly stiffened.

"...Ghkk."

It wasn't loud.

More like the sound of someone who'd just taken a critical hit.

Yuu tilted his head.

"...Did I say something strange?"

Mizuki forced a smile, though it looked far less convincing than before.

"N-No..."

"Haha..."

"It's just..."

They rubbed the back of their neck awkwardly, avoiding his eyes.

"...My attendance isn't exactly... great."

"I skip school... a lot."

"...Like..."

"A lot, a lot."

Yuu nodded slowly, pretending this was completely new information.

"I see..."

"That explains why I've never noticed you."

Mizuki let out an exaggerated sigh of relief.

"Exactly!"

"For a second I thought you were about to say, 'I've definitely seen you before!'"

They pointed dramatically at him.

"That would've been scary!"

Yuu laughed.

"I don't think I'd be that observant."

(Considering you've barely been going...)

He kept that thought to himself.

Mizuki smiled again, far more naturally this time.

"Still..."

"Maybe I'll actually have a reason to show up once in a while."

They flashed him a playful grin.

"After all..."

"It'd be pretty rude to keep my new shopping buddy waiting, wouldn't it?"

Yuu smiled softly.

"...I'd appreciate that."

Hidden beneath that calm expression, however, another thought quietly surfaced.

(Good...)

(Now I know where to start.)

(If Mizuki begins coming to school more often... it'll make approaching Ena much easier.)

(And maybe...)

(This time, I can prevent whatever's waiting for them.)

Mizuki let out a long, satisfied stretch, both arms reaching toward the evening sky as they hummed cheerfully.

"Whew~!"

They spun around on their heel, shopping bags swaying lightly in their hands.

"Well then..." A bright smile spread across their face. "I guess our little shopping adventure ends here!"

Yuu glanced toward the darkening sky. The shopping district had begun to glow beneath rows of warm streetlights, while the last traces of sunset disappeared beyond the city skyline.

"...Yeah."

"It's already getting late."

His gaze drifted toward the busy intersection ahead.

(Surely...)

(The incident won't happen this time.)

(I looped back before it could happen...)

(Everything should be fine now.)

Mizuki suddenly snapped their fingers.

"Oh!"

They turned back around with an excited grin.

"Before you go..."

"Wanna exchange contacts?"

Yuu blinked before smiling.

"...Sure."

Mizuki immediately pulled out their phone.

"Hehe~ Nice!"

"I'll show you mine first."

They opened their messaging app before displaying their QR code with a flourish.

"There!"

Yuu took out his own phone and scanned it.

Beep.

Contact added.

A second later, Mizuki scanned Yuu's QR code as well.

Beep.

"There we go!"

Mizuki waved their phone triumphantly.

"Now we're officially friends!"

Yuu chuckled softly.

"...That was fast."

"Of course it was!"

Mizuki placed both hands on their hips with mock pride.

"I don't hand out my contact info to just anyone, you know."

"Oh?"

"So I should feel honored?"

"Mhm!" They gave an exaggerated nod. "Very honored."

"I'll keep that in mind."

Mizuki slipped their phone back into their pocket before taking a few steps backward.

"Well then..."

"See you around, Hazuki!"

They raised one hand in a carefree wave.

"Try not to get lost without your fashion advisor, okay?"

"I'll do my best."

"Hehe!"

With one final wink, Mizuki turned and disappeared into the evening crowd.

Yuu remained where he was, watching until the pink-haired figure could no longer be seen.

The smile on his face slowly faded.

His eyes shifted toward the intersection ahead.

Yuu's smile remained for only a heartbeat.

Then—

It faded.

Not dramatically.

Not painfully.

It simply... disappeared.

The words echoed through the back of his mind.

(I'm looking forward to this... This time I'll save them... especially her.)

He stopped walking.

The shopping bag hanging from his hand swayed gently.

"..."

His brows slowly knitted together.

"...Huh?"

A strange feeling settled deep within his chest.

That sentence...

It hadn't felt like something he consciously thought.

It had simply...

...slipped out.

Like a memory.

Or perhaps...

An instinct.

His fingers unconsciously tightened around his phone.

"...Save?"

He whispered the word beneath his breath, testing how it sounded.

"...Did I just..."

His eyes slowly widened.

"...blurt that out?"

End Notes

This is a fanfiction project written by someone who loves PJSK, aside from the characters.
I fell in love with the vibes, the music, and the concept, and thought,
“What if someone who didn’t belong… showed up anyway?”

Consider this a story from the outside looking in. An extra with no place in the plot,
quietly stepping into the world behind the stage lights.

Updates might be slow, but I promise every chapter will be written with care.

Please drop by the Archive and comment to let the creator know if you enjoyed their work!